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Mrs. Fitz-Maurice on Leave

Gabrielle Fitz-Maurice

Dudley
Tennant

MRS. FITZ-MAURICE ON LEAVE

BY

GABRIELLE FITZ-MAURICE

LONDON
GREENING & CO., LTD.
1908

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Mrs. Fitz-Maurice on Leave

CHAPTER I

January 3, 1906.

I TOLD Peter I would keep a diary, and faithfully write down in it everything that happens to me while I'm away from him. So I'm beginning at once.

We are just getting out of the harbour, and soon the palm-trees on Malabar Hill will be all there is to be seen of India.

I feel very miserable, as I have never been away from Peter for more than a week or two since we were married, and I simply howled when we said good-bye. I believe Peter wanted to howl too, he was so

49 x 6 2

brusque and abrupt, and kept on turning his back to look at curious sights which seemed to catch his eye once a minute.

It might be as well, before going on, to say who I am, so—

I am Gabrielle Fitz-Maurice, and Peter, my husband, is in the Royal Scots, and we have been in India since we were married three years ago. I have somehow or other got ill, and the horrid old doctor at Poona said that I must go home until next October. I begged and pleaded, but Peter insisted on it, so here I am on the *Sicilia*. She is a nice ship as transports go, and if only Peter were on board I should enjoy the voyage, and be quite glad to leave India for a bit. As I have already said, I told Peter I would chronicle carefully everything that happens to me until we are together again. Peter said he

would like to know everything I did, and nothing would be too small and insignificant to write about. Anything about me would be of interest to him, so I am going to do my very best.

Most people I know keep their diaries solemnly and sacredly secret, and say in the introduction that they would die of shyness if any outside eye beheld their confessions. But it seems to me that that is rot, and a great waste of time and labour too. I should not feel shy about mine being read at all. In fact, I should be immensely disappointed if all my friends *didn't* read it. I may even publish it one day, so I shall try to write it nicely and be careful about the grammar with that end in view.

Perhaps I ought to describe myself to begin with. I am twenty-three,

tall, slight, but not too thin, blue eyes with black lashes, and brown hair, rather curly.

As a child, I and my sister lived with Aunt Arabella. Our parents died when we were tiny, and Aunt Arabella took care of us from that moment. We lived in the depths of the country, with a governess to look after us till we were grown up —that is till Norah, who is several years my senior, was grown up—and then we lived chiefly in London, where Aunt Arabella has a gloomy old house in Berkeley Square. My sister married as soon as she was out, and afterwards I was horribly dull until I married too.

When I get to England, I shall have to go to Aunt Arabella to begin with, as I have no other relations there. Norah and her family are abroad till the spring—otherwise I

should go to her. Later on I shall, of course. Aunt Arabella and I used not to get on very well, and the prospect of staying with her for any length of time does not appeal to me. It is so dull there. Aunt Arabella's friends are such old trouts, and she herself is in a constant condition of being shocked at everything I do and nearly everything I say, which is trying. At least, this used to be the state of things; but perhaps my aunt has improved since I saw her. I sincerely hope she has.

How glad I shall be when the autumn comes, and Peter gets leave and comes home. I'm horribly in love with Peter, although we have been married for three years, and he is even worse in love with me, so I am afraid we shall both be very unhappy. Now that has made me want to cry again.

January 23. I have been ill ever since, and down in my cabin all the time. Fever of course. What a horrid thing it is. I'm not sure whether I feel most like a sick sheep or a wilted worm—anyway I feel very chewed—stringish, and look an appalling wreck. It is very annoying to come home looking ugly, especially as Aunt Arabella is certain to express her opinion, however uncomplimentary, in the plainest terms. Now, even although you know you're looking plain already, to be told so makes you feel the absolute *ne plus ultra* of hideosity on the spot, which is depressing. There is a very kind doctor-man on board who has been looking after me. His name is Colonel Walter, and he has got grey hair and a very kind face. I think he is the kindest man I ever met. Although I have been in my cabin all

the time, and very seedy and uninteresting and ugly, he comes and sits with me quite a long time every day, and tells me all the gossip of the ship, and brings me ice and fruit and things himself. I have become quite fond of him, and have told him all about Peter. It is so nice to be able to talk about him, only sometimes I cry, but Colonel Walter is such a dear and never seems to mind. He just pats my shoulder and tells me to buck up, and that Peter will be able to get his leave sooner than we think very likely. It is really decent of him, you know—because a man just hates a woman to cry. It absolutely frightens him. So that Colonel Walter is really a Trojan to have been so decent to me about it. I shall feel quite sorry to leave him, but he says he will often be in town, and will come to see me at Aunt Arabella's.

We get into Southampton to-morrow. I am disappointed not to have written more of my diary. Ship-life is amusing, and would have made splendid copy for this literary effort.

Now I must stop, as stewardess has arrived to help me pack.

Oh dear, I feel so dreary at the thought of Aunt Arabella—and I miss Peter more every day.

Note. When writing out my diary and getting it ready for publication, it seemed to me that it would read better written as a narrative than in disjointed jottings down as things happened. So I divided it into chapters, and used the past tense, just as in an ordinary book.

G. F-M.

CHAPTER II

AFTER two and a half days at Aunt Arabella's, I found it was even deadlier than I had imagined. My aunt was as she always had been, only more so. Her personal appearance, which had always repelled me when I was a child, put me off as much as ever now that I was grown up. Aunt Arabella wears her hair scraped up tight to her skull, and the ends pinned firmly in skinny coils on the top of it. Her forehead is of colossal dimensions. She has a thin face with a mouth that turns down at the corners, and, to complete the sketch, a scraggily angular figure to whose unbeautiful symmetry her dowdy garments are closely moulded.

Almost her first remark was—as I knew it would be—

"My dear, how terribly plain and yellow you are looking. You will remember that I warned you when you married of the inevitably bad effect the hot climate would exercise upon your complexion."

I had a go of fever that day, and felt far too limp and dispirited to utter any reply, my one desire being to place my weary bones as early as might be in a bed, the which latter, after those three weeks of discomfort in my bunk, loomed as a wildly luxurious resting-place. But there floated dimly through my brain the spectral vision of Aunt Arabella's appearance after all the illness, heat, fever, discomfort and quinine that had been my lot.

After this cheering remark, she proceeded to eye me critically as I pulled off my things, and after an exhaustive scrutiny, during which I

feebly wondered what her object might be in so doing, she heaved a deep sigh indicating both disapproval and disappointment, but said nothing till I was safely between the blankets. Then, perched in a stiffly uncomfortable chair beside the fireplace, her bright, hard, little eyes twinkling at me through the rails of the bed—

"I am disappointed," said Aunt Arabella.

"Yes?" I inquired languidly.

"I had *hoped* there was a special reason for your coming home, Gabrielle," said my aunt.

"So there was—I was ill—I still am——"

"Yes," rejoined Aunt Arabella, "but I *had* hoped that was merely the result of a very much to be desired cause."

My mind groped dimly after her

meaning, and I felt myself flushing as a foreboding of it began to penetrate the mists of my intellect.

"You have been married over three years, Gabrielle," proceeded the terrible old lady, "and I fail entirely to understand how it is that I am still without a nephew or a niece from your side of the family."

I could cheerfully have boxed Aunt Arabella's ears at that moment.

"I'm afraid you must continue in failing to understand," I said, shortly enough.

"It is a disappointment to me, my dear," said Aunt Arabella, "and seeing that you are both young and healthy people, it really is most incomprehensible."

"Does it not occur to you," said I, "that we may not wish to have children?"

"I should tremble to contemplate

anything so unnatural and wrong," said my aunt. "Besides, I do not see how your personal wishes could affect the matter. These things, my dear Gabrielle, are entirely in the hands of One Above."

I gasped, as Aunt Arabella gave expression to these astonishing facts, and was on the point of asking whence she derived her remarkable information on the subject, when her prim voice began again.

"It is a constant surprise to me," said my aunt, "how few of the young married couples now-a-days seem to have any children, and those who do have any, as a rule, seem capable only of producing *one*. It is a terrible sign, my dear, of the deterioration of the race. But I am deeply grieved that you and your husband seem to be affected by it. I had hoped otherwise," and she regarded

me with a mournful air tempered by severity.

"I shall never have any children," I said, nearly choking, "because I don't want to," I added defiantly, "and nor does Peter," I ended.

Aunt Arabella's countenance was a study in its portrayal of conflicting emotions, outraged prejudices, and other things. She began several remarks, but abandoned them in succession, and finally took a frigid departure, emitting through the crack of the door—

"I do not at all understand your meaning, Gabrielle."

"I should be more than surprised if you did," was my retort, as the door shut behind her stiffly frumpish skirts, and I was free to give vent to the weak fit of laughter which was struggling for an exit.

After a day or two I was better and

able to be up—but oh, the dreariness of that house!

The day begins with prayers in the dining-room at eight o'clock. The wretched servants, with Bibles in their hands, sit in a row, miles from the fire and shivering in draughts from the doors in a line with which they sit. Aunt Arabella, a huge tome before her, places herself at the head of the table, and reads in a frigid voice a chapter or a psalm, after which, out of a book, she intones a long prayer, consisting almost entirely of three-syllable words, which must have taxed the powers of its author considerably. This over, she bleats through the paternoster, followed by the servants' voices in a low confused mumbling, after which she pronounces the benediction in hard, strident tones, and the servants file dejectedly out of the room looking

thoroughly depressed, while my aunt attacks the duties of the day, filled with a proud sense of having left undone nothing that she ought to have done, and quite oblivious of the gloom which her pious exercises have produced.

Aunt Arabella is, before all things, religious. She expects moreover that every one with whom she comes in contact shall be religious too. For this reason the rule of her house is that all the servants must attend prayers whether they wish to or not, and the poor things are not allowed to go to bed before prayers again at ten o'clock in the evening, which really strikes me as quite criminal cruelty. Think of the poor little under-maids, tired out after a long day passed in such exhilarating pursuits as sweeping, cleaning, carrying water and peeling potatoes, being

kept out of their beds simply for the sake of this dry and useless routine, knowing that their weary little bodies will have to be up and doing again at six a.m. in the cold and dark of the winter morning. Talk about prevention of cruelty to animals! And yet if you suggested to Aunt Arabella that she was guilty even of unkindness, she would have forty-eleven fits on the spot. She would also tell you that she was caring for the maids' immortal souls, which were a far greater consideration than their bodies.

Aunt Arabella spends much time in church. She regards it as nothing less than a crime to fail in attending morning and evening service on Sundays, and she would think it very wanting in Christian zeal not to go once or twice in the week as well. She would consider any one who con-

fessed to not reading the Bible and saying prayers every night and morning as quite lost in heathen ignorance and darkness. But yet Aunt Arabella does not strike one as a very nice or a very good old lady—certainly not as a kind one. Her tongue is very sharp and she doesn't mind what unkind things she says about her best friends, as long as she makes people laugh by her cutting and often very witty speeches. Norah and I used to wonder when we were children why she taught us about "God is Love," and yet never seemed to love any one herself. Now that I'm grown up it seems to me that she spends all her energies upon the correct and minute observance of the letter of religion and never thinks about the spirit of it at all—and this makes me long to ask her what she imagines religion was invented for.

CHAPTER III

AUNT ARABELLA and I certainly do rub each other up the wrong way. This is a distressing circumstance, since I shall have to be here for the next two months at least.

I think Aunt Arabella prim, and narrow-minded, and old-fashioned, and stuffed full of British smug self-satisfaction, only I try to keep this opinion to myself. Aunt Arabella thinks *me* tomboyish, and slangy, and impetuous, and youthfully foolish and ignorant, and verging on fast, and painfully irreligious. Only —so far from keeping these beautiful thoughts to herself—she loses no opportunity of summing up against me, always adding a rider to the effect that I shall probably ruin my

husband, come to a bad end myself, and bring down her grey hairs with sorrow to the grave. (N.B.—Personally, I doubt there being any hair left by that time, there's so jolly little of it now.) And all for no specific reason that I have been able to discover as yet, unless it is that I fail to agree with her marvellously narrow views on all subjects, and presume to think things out for myself instead of meekly accepting what I'm told without attempting to investigate or understand it. Now this is bad enough in itself, but when to it you add a peculiarly pernicious form of conservatism which leads you to believe everything you ever believed just for no earthly reason but because you, your mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and great-grandmothers' aunts to the eighth and ninth hundred generation

always have so believed, you will see what terrible results are likely to ensue, if, not only believing but acting on the belief, we take it as a hypothesis that these ancient ladies and their beliefs were hopelessly wrong to start with. Why, the spread of measles would be nothing to it.

"When I was young," Aunt Arabella would say, waving a bony finger at me, "I should never have presumed to hold opinions of my own, or to think anything contrary to what my elders and betters taught me."

"But, Aunt Arabella," I said at last, unable to bear this remark any longer in silence, "what is the good of possessing reasoning faculties if you never use them?"

"When of mature age," said my aunt, "and possessed of some useful experience and knowledge of the

world, you may be capable of judging for yourself in small matters."

"But, Aunt Arabella, I consider that I am now of mature age—at twenty-three years of age one is no longer a child—specially when one has been married for three out of the twenty; and as for experience, why I've had lots, and I'm simply crammed with knowledge of the world."

Warming to my subject, and keen on the discussion, I somehow became oblivious of the fact that it was to Aunt Arabella I was talking.

"I will tell you," I said, "some useful deductions I have drawn from my experience, and a few rules of conduct I have framed on them."

My aunt held herself ready to listen, though with an air of supercilious superiority, and I sat up on the hearth-rug, and ticked my observations off on my fingers.

"*First.* Never repeat anything to anybody—not even to your best man.

"*Second.* Never tell any woman—not your greatest friend—even that you've got a best man.

"*Third.* Never tell any other man that you've got a best man. If you do, either he gets jealous and goes off in a rage, which is a pity, or he brings all his energies to work to put himself in that best man's place, which is still more a pity, because his devotion becomes so acute that you must either give him his *congé*, or allow him to oust your best man. (N.B.—In either case you're bound to lose one of them.)

"*Fourth.*" But at this moment I happened to look up, and discovered Aunt Arabella's horrified gaze fixed upon me.

"Gabrielle," said my aunt in a voice that shook with indignation,

" you shock me unspeakably. You speak as a fast woman of the world speaks—and after all the trouble I took in bringing you up!"

" But," I said, " you say I've no knowledge or experience, and I'm only just trying to show you that I have some."

" My dear," said Aunt Arabella, with exceeding frigidity, " I am happy to think that I have reached my—ahem—present age without any of the kind of experience you mention." (I found no difficulty in believing it. But if she only knew what she had missed.)

" ' Best men ' indeed," continued my aunt, " what a horrid fast expression. What would your poor husband say, Gabrielle?"

" Oh, Peter knows all about my best men, Aunt Arabella," I assured her. " He likes them all too, aw-

fully. You see he knows all right I wouldn't have any one for a best man but a nice one. Besides, he has lots of best girls. We always advise each other who to have. B.G.'s and B.M.'s, we call them, and if either of us doesn't like the other's B.G. or B.M., we mutually agree to drop them. That's in the contract.

"It only happened once though, and that was when a horrid old major-man tried to kiss me one day when he came to call and I was alone. I dropped him after that."

"Indeed—I should hope so," said Aunt Arabella faintly. "You—you really are a very extraordinary couple, Gabrielle," she added, regarding me as she might have done a large green snake which had suddenly appeared in the drawing-room.

"Not a bit of it," I said. "We're just very good pals, that's all, and

it's much the best way to get on. Lots of people spend their time in quarrelling about each other's B.G.'s and B.M.'s, and we never have a cross word about them. And really it's quite surprising what lots of B.M.'s one has who never try to kiss one or anything——"

"Gabrielle!" shrieked my aunt. "I really cannot endure such remarks. I consider them *most* improper."

"And I am not at all surprised to hear it," said a grave deep voice behind her, making us both jump, and there stood Colonel Walter with a perfectly impassive face, but when he looked at me I saw little devils twinkling in his eyes.

"Oh, Aunt Arabella," I gasped, "it's"—and I simply couldn't resist it—"it's one of my best men!"

CHAPTER IV

THERE was quite a tableau. Aunt Arabella's face underwent every variety of scandalized expression that there is. After which she remarked in frigid tones that she had better perhaps retire, as we probably wished to be alone.

"Why?" I asked, while Colonel Walter said in a disappointed sort of voice, that he had been looking forward so much to knowing Aunt Arabella, as I had told him so much about her during the voyage—I had! —and that he was sure she could not be so unkind as to disappoint him now that the realization of this desire was possible.

Aunt Arabella thawed with marvellous suddenness under this

tactful speech, and we were having tea quite cheerfully in ten minutes' time. Colonel Walter really is splendid—I have never seen a man grapple so successfully with an awkward situation. Aunt Arabella was positively bridling and being coy under Colonel Walter's masterly methods, when nearly an hour later, the butler came to say that she was wanted at the telephone, and Colonel Walter and I were left alone.

"So, my lady," he said smiling, after a little pause, "it's quite surprising what lots of B.M.'s one has who never try to kiss one or anything, eh?"

I got crimson, and made a little face at him, but said nothing.

"Ah well!" he said presently, "in your case I honestly think that it *is* rather surprising. No," as I wriggled my shoulder vexedly,

"don't get annoyed. That wasn't meant as a frivolous remark, but a sober, self-evident fact. Now—a change of scene would be good for you, I think. There has been no fever since Tuesday? Excellent. We will get a hansom and go and do another tea somewhere cheery as soon as you can get dressed."

"Oh, how ripping!" I cried, jumping up. "I won't be one second," and off I flew.

Aunt Arabella met me on the stairs as I came down in my fur coat and most becoming hat and earrings.

"You are going out?" she inquired with elevated eyebrows.

"Yes. Colonel Walter is taking me to tea at Rumpelmeyer's," I told her.

"You have just had *one* tea," said my aunt severely.

"And now I'm going to have

another," I said, "and there will be an orchestra and pretty lights and people and things," and on I went with my chin stuck out, while Aunt Arabella snorted disapprovingly. I reached the drawing-room in a whirl.

"Our aunt is displeased?" asked Colonel Walter as we went downstairs; "never mind. We have to pay for all our little pleasures in this wicked old world."

How I love hansom cabs! I snuggled cosily into my corner as he told the cabby "Rumpelmeyer," and we drove away. Presently Colonel Walter turned a little to me, and laid one hand lightly on my arm.

"If my lady has any use for another best man who won't try to kiss her or anything," he said, "here is one."

His face was quite grave and very kind as I looked at him.

"Yes, please," I said, "I'd like you for a best man most awfully," and gave him my hand.

He gave it a little squeeze and let it go. "That's all fixed up then," he said, smiling at me again out of his nice grey eyes, only somehow, deep down in them, there was a queer little sad look, and about his mouth, which I could just see under his grey moustache, there were sad little lines too.

We got to Rumpelmeyer's quite soon, and it was all so bright and cheery that I felt tremendously bucked up and quite gay again—gayer than I had ever felt since I said good-bye to Peter.

Colonel Walter was quite gay too, and very amusing as well, and we laughed and talked nonsense and

chaffed each other like two children out for a holiday. Colonel Walter told me later on that he thought it was bad for me to stay in a dreary house like Aunt Arabella's.

"You want some one to cheer you up," he said, "an atmosphere of gloom and depression is the last thing I want for you. Isn't there some one else you could stay with?"

There was only Norah, I told him, and she was abroad till the spring. Otherwise I was almost quite relationless. Peter's people were up in Scotland, and that was too cold. Then, quite suddenly, I thought of Betty.

Betty is a sort of far-away cousin. She is years older than Norah and me. She has been married for years, and is the best sort going. She was so kind to us always when

we were children, and used to have us down to stay with her in Devonshire, and give us a good time. But now she was in Ireland, I remembered, near Dublin. I told Colonel Walter this when he asked, and he said it was splendid. There was a doctor in Dublin he would like me to be under, and I had better write to Betty at once and ask her to have me. I said I would, and promptly felt gayer than ever. The prospect of getting away from Aunt Arabella, and the dreary severe piety of the house in Berkeley Square was simply dazzling. I told Colonel Walter and he laughed, and said that if I got any cheerier we should be thrown out. And then we found it was quite late, and sent for a hansom and drove home. Colonel Walter got me a ripping box of cigarettes on the way, though he said smoking

was very bad for fever patients, and I must promise not to smoke many a day. He was so kind and dear, and I could have cried when the hall door shut on him at Aunt Arabella's. He had said he would come again in a day or two to see if the Irish visit was fixed up, and I had promised to write to Betty that night.

Aunt Arabella went out directly after dinner to some sort of religious entertainment, I could not quite get the hang of it from her remarks, but it was apparently going to be a marvellous mix-up of parsons, prayers, and potations—the last named being coffee, and weak at that.

When she had gone, I betook myself to our ancient nursery at the top of the house, and, having written my letter, thought of Peter, and dropped a few tears at the same time, I opened Colonel Walter's box of

cigarettes, and smoked lazily in a big chair before the fire till I went fast asleep.

"Gabrielle!" my aunt's iciest tones penetrated the oblivion which enwrapped me abruptly.

"Yes, Aunt Arabella!" I drowsily said.

My aunt came nearer in her peculiarly fussy little way and stood before me, blinking at me through her spectacles.

"I smell—tobacco," said my aunt, her lips closing with a snap behind the words, which were uttered in precisely the tones she would have employed in saying, "I see the tip of the devil's tail."

"Yes," I said, in a non-committal sort of way, and gradually becoming more awake.

"You have had—a visitor?" she said in a steely voice.

"Good Lord, no," said I, "I mean—I beg your pardon, Aunt Arabella, no. What makes you think that?"

"Have I not said that the room reeks of tobacco," said my aunt trenchantly.

"Oh yes, but that's only me," I said, "I was smoking before I went to sleep——"

"*Smoking!*"

And then what a torrent of indignation came down upon me. My aunt up and spoke her mind as only she could—I was fast—vulgar—dirty—degenerate—what you will, for indulging such a habit. I gave her plenty of time, and she made the most of it. When at length she paused, I said—

"In reply to all those very choice remarks I have to say just this: My husband approves of my smok-

ing—I shall therefore continue to smoke," and I walked to the door.

"Good-night, Aunt Arabella, I'm going to bed." I turned the handle and paused. "You've been having your prayers and coffee," I said, "why should you grudge me my little cigarette?" and I went out, leaving my aunt incapable of speech in her transfixed amazement.

"I know what it was," I added, putting my head round the corner of the door, "too much praying and not enough coffee." Then I shut the door and went.

Things were a bit strained after this, and I was enchanted, the next day but one, to get from Betty in reply to my letter a wire—

"My dear, come this moment!" which was so like Betty.

Aunt Arabella received the news of my plans sniffily, and remarked

that Betty had wasted three-halfpence in unnecessary wording, to which I replied that kind words were worth their weight in gold.

Colonel Walter called in the afternoon. Luckily, Aunt Arabella was out. I told him my good news, and he said he was delighted that I was off to other and cheerier scenes. I told him that I was going the next day, and he said the sooner the better.

He didn't stay very long, and when he got up to go, he took my hand very gently in both of his and said—

"Is my little pal going to write to me when she is in Ireland?"

I told him that of course I would.

He stood looking down at me and smiling a little.

"And has it struck you what a splendidly unselfish deed I've com-

mitted in sending you away across the water?" he asked me.

I laughed—and told him that it had not struck me in that way.

Suddenly he was quite grave.

"I shall miss you a great deal, my child," he said. "Good-bye, I want to see you in the spring quite well and strong. Don't forget to write to me—and——" He waited a moment, and I caught the flicker of that sad, little smile about his eyes and mouth, "God bless you, my child," he said, and was gone.

CHAPTER V

IT is not easy to describe Betty. She isn't really young—but one always feels that she is. She is always laughing, and I have never yet seen her depressed, although people say that when her husband died—ages ago it was, and he was old enough to be her father anyway—she nearly broke her heart, and wept for whole days without stopping. It must have exhausted her capacities in that line, for she has never wept since.

You never know where you may find Betty. One minute she has taken a house in the depths of Devonshire, and quite soon afterwards a scrap of writing arrives on a post-card to tell you of her safe arrival in Mexico.

What possessed her to come over to Ireland this winter I can't tell you, and certainly Betty herself couldn't. So it must remain a mystery.

I arrived at nine o'clock in the morning, utterly weary, dishevelled and sick of life—life in boats and trains particularly—and found Betty in a perfectly lovely *négligée* and no shoes and stockings on the door-step. That's so like Betty.

She explained that she had heard the motor coming, so couldn't wait to put any on, as she dragged me up-stairs to a ducky little pink room, where, two minutes later, I found myself undressed and in bed.

"You lamb!" said Betty, patting my face with nice plump kind hands that smelt of rosemary, "now some breakfast, and then to sleep you go," and away sped Betty to order eggs and toast and tea. I caught sight of

a long tear in the dainty *négligée* as she whisked its frills and laces round the door, and that again is so like Betty. She never has a maid. Maids bother her, she says. She never mends her clothes. She thinks life is too short for it. She wears things to their utmost limit of respectability, and then—to use her own words—she "feels that the poor-sale is yawning for her entire wardrobe." It gets it too, and Betty gets a complete new one, to the very last detail. How nice to be Betty!

I slept the sleep of the sick-of-life—and particularly ship and train life—till the evening. Most people would have come fussing in to see if I was asleep, or sent up some lunch because "you *must* have lunch," but Betty's ideas were otherwise.

"If you wanted anything there was a bell," she told me, "or you

could shout. I'm glad you slept so long, you look packs better. Come and have tea, you lamb."

I followed her into a room that was very dainty, and full of cushions, and very warm. We had tea, and then Betty handed me her cigarette case, and we smoked, curled up in the soft depths of a low wide lounge by the fire. They were Turkish cigarettes of an absolutely exclusive brand. I simply purred with comfort and contentment.

"Aunt Arabella—straight-backed chairs—stiffly perpendicular position—peas—potatoes—prunes and prism," I presently remarked.

"Poor mite," said Betty.

"She disapproves of me very vehemently indeed," I told her. "She would of you too. She'd call you a lost sheep and predict your ultimate arrival in the nether regions."

Betty stared in amazement.

"Why?" she wondered.

"Because you smoke," I told her, blowing out filmy streams and watching them float up to the little naked cupids on the ceiling. "Because—because you come and meet your guests without any shoes and stockings on, because you lounge about in a tea-gown—because, in short, you allow yourself to be comfortable. My dear Betty, it is wrong to lounge, it is bad manners to be comfortable, it is vulgar to wear *négligée* garments, it is low to smoke. In fact, we're both very depraved indeed."

Betty shouted with laughter. She always does everything so thoroughly.

"What else have you done to displease Aunt Arabella?" she asked me.

"I haven't got a baby," I said. "It's—it's criminal not to have babies—don't laugh, Betty. I ought to have had at least two by now, and Aunt Arabella can't understand it at all."

Betty lay back and laughed again with an open mouth.

I mean that quite literally. She lay flat on her back and laughed at the top of her voice with her mouth open. I do admire Betty. So few people have the courage of their opinions; I know no other woman who has the pluck to permit herself to lie on her back and guffaw however much she wanted to. Betty did it. She looked quite nice doing it too.

Then I told her about Colonel Walter and the doctor in Dublin he wanted me to be under. She said she would take me up in the car next day.

She knew the doctor by name. He was quite old, and very clever, and was sure to have me well in no time.

"You don't look very ill," Betty told me, "only rather white and thin. You will soon be all right, dear lamb. What a pretty girl you are! Men must try to flirt with you considerably. What does Peter say?"

"He doesn't say anything, unless a horrid man comes along," I said. "He is just the most absolute angel. I always chuck any man that he doesn't like, of course. Oh, Peter is just Peter, the most perfect dear," and I nearly cried. Talking about Peter makes me.

Betty patted my hand, and told me to buck up, and handed me another cigarette.

"That's all right," she said after a

while, "stick to Peter like a good little kid. It's always the best thing to do. You're very lucky, do you know? to have a husband like Peter."

CHAPTER VI

THE Dublin doctor was very successful, and I began to get well quite quickly. At first Betty made me keep quiet and rest a great deal. Of course the doctor-man—Sir Norman Macky—said I was to rest, but does one ever take much notice of what doctors say? It is their business to make rules and order one about, so naturally they do it, but it doesn't follow that one does what they tell one—I never had before—but Betty made me, and I think it's quite likely that it may have had something to do with my getting well so quickly.

Betty's house was about five miles from the Curragh, where there were gay doings always afoot, and five miles in a car is a mere speck.

When I got much stronger, we began to join in all the fun, and oh, we did have a good time. We hunted two days a week. The riding is rough in Ireland, but it is exciting, and Betty lent me the most ripping gee. We motored a lot, and we lunched and dined with lots of nice cheery men. I was not allowed to dance though, and that was a pity, because I love dancing.

Betty had lots of pals. She never had one special pal. She said it was wiser not to specialize, and saved several sorts of difficulties. She advised me not to, and I didn't. It was they who specialized, and could I help that?

There was a major-man who did it to such an extent that I was bored almost to tears, and then a rather superior-to-the-ordinary-run-of-subaltern took to it, and that balanced

things a bit, only I used often to feel like a doll must when two puppies seize it on opposite sides, and pull in turn.

The major-man would arrive, say, at eleven in the morning, because he had just come across a book I might like to read, or because he had heard I was seedy and wanted to inquire—or for some other reason. He had quite a new fresh one every day. Then, when he had been there an hour or so, the subaltern would appear. Of course, being a subaltern, he could not get off duty as soon as the major-man, but he came as soon as he could. He used to come because his bicycle tyre had punctured and he knew Betty's chauffeur would mend it for him—or because we might not have heard something crucial about the next meet. Betty and I used to talk to them, and sew,

and smoke, only Betty was sometimes busy, and then I had to entertain them alone.

The major-man is the sort of one who looks into your eyes a good deal, and says little sympathetic things in a low voice; he also strokes your hand if you leave it lying carelessly about. After finding this out, I always kept mine carefully out of his way and employed with something.

If it is after dinner in the greenhouse, he takes your fan and fans you very gently, and talks with his face so near you that one can always feel his breath against your face and neck.

He brought me little books, and one day a print of a charming picture. The subject was a girl with no clothes on. So I gave it him back, saying that I could not accept such a picture from him.

"Surely you're not squeamish on such subjects?" he asked me.

I said—"I don't quite know what you mean by being 'squeamish,' but Peter would not like me to take from you a picture of a naked girl."

"You don't mince words," he said, "in fact you call a spade a spade with the most singular outspokenness I ever remember to have encountered in a young lady. Now, I should like to ask you, purely from curiosity, if you always and under all circumstances do what Peter wishes?"

"Yes," I said, "if I remember about him I do."

"Well," he answered, and his eyes went all funny and pink—they often do while he's talking to me—"I'll tell you this, there is nothing on earth that I want so enormously at the present moment, as that I

might spend a short time in your company while you did *not* remember about 'Peter.'"

"I can't imagine why," I said, "and anyway your wish is never likely to be gratified simply because I nearly always am thinking about him—you see he is much the nicest man I know."

The major-man said nothing for a bit. He had a queer glary sort of look, and he grated his teeth together in a horrid way he has. Then——

"Will you promise me this?" he said. "If ever a moment comes when you forget about your husband, will you tell me?"

I shrieked with laughter.

"Why, how silly you are," I said. "If I remembered that I wasn't remembering about him, I should be remembering, don't you see?"

Any one can see from this remark how Irish I had become.

He sprang up, looking white and very fierce, and seizing me by the shoulder, put his head down till I thought he was going to kiss my neck, and wondered how I could stop him—only he didn't try to kiss me. He bit me quite hard on the shoulder. It was the most extraordinary thing that had ever happened to me, and I was furious. I didn't utter a sound when I felt his teeth on me, but I gave him the most awful bang on the head with my clenched fist. It hurt me so much that I could have cried, but he didn't seem to feel it a bit. He let me go, however, and stepped away a pace or two, and his eyes were quite red, and he muttered something in a funny jumbling sort of way, gave himself a shake, and went quickly away.

I felt rather frightened and very angry, so I told Betty about it, and thereafter she left me alone with the major-man no more.

CHAPTER VII

THE subaltern is quite different. He only brings me flowers. At least, he sends them by an orderly. I always thank him the next time I see him, and he gets awfully red and uncomfortable and looks thoroughly *gauche*. He doesn't try to look into one's eyes, in fact he never looks at one at all unless he thinks one doesn't see, and then he gapes, with his eyes sticking out and his mouth open. He would never presume to *touch* my hand—he looks at it as if it belonged to a crusader on a tombstone, or something quite holy and above this wicked world. And once, when I dropped my handkerchief and he picked it up for me, he held it as if he thought it would

melt away, and looked as if he were saying his prayers in church all the time. I verily believe that if I sent him on a thirty-mile ride in the middle of a snowstorm on a pitch-black night before he had his dinner, he would go saying "thank you" for letting him do it for me. While as for the major-man, if I made an appointment and kept him waiting a bit, or borrowed a book and forgot to return it, he'd fuss round like a bluebottle and say "damn the woman," even though he'd looked into my eyes in the most tender manner, and tried to stroke my hand only the minute before.

Betty and I had a great discussion the other day about what was the nicest age for a man to be. I mean, at what age men were nicest. *I* said old men were nicest, and I was thinking of Colonel Walter. Betty

asked why I put my money on old men, and I said because one could always trust them not to take liberties and to be decent to one.

"*What!*" said Betty, giving her pompadour a terrific tug, and sitting up with her mouth more than ajar, "my good child, you weren't joking, were you?"

"Joking!" I said; "rather not. That's my solemn and fixed belief, Betty."

"Arrah, jewel—and may the Larrd be havin' an oye to yer then," said Betty in broad Irish, "if yer thruly afther thinkin' that it's the auld men ye can put anny faith in whatever."

"Betty," I said, "now listen to me, and I'll tell you what my conclusions are on this subject—drawn from personal experience, mind you."

Betty nodded, and sat up, lighting a fresh cigarette. I began—

"First of all there are the young men. They are, generally speaking, respectful. They regard you as the sun, moon, and stars and everything glorious you ever heard of rolled into one. They are ready to do anything whatever for you. They'll play bridge with you when you go no trumps on a king and a queen and nothing besides, and trump their best card, and declare 'spades' on your own hand when they've got a hundred aces—and smile all the time.

"Also they are wildly—unheard-ofly extravagant. They would spend a guinea a day on flowers for you if you'd let them, and although they didn't possess half that sum. They would throw away mints of money—even if they hadn't got any—in

taking you to theatres and giving supper parties for you, and they'd make any sort of a fool of themselves you like to mention if they thought they could please you in the remotest degree by doing it."

"Yes," said Betty, "go on, that's all right. For a lamb of your tender years you've certainly observed to some purpose. Well?"

"Next," I said, "are the middle-aged men. They chiefly don't care very much for anybody but themselves, but they like to make you think that they adore you unspeakably—simply because they wish *you* to be in love with *them*. They consider it their right, and one of the ordinary necessaries of existence that they should be the adored and beloved of one or more women, almost as necessary as their pipe or their Benedictine after dinner.

Necessary you must understand to their vanity, also to their prestige with men, among whom they jauntily wear their laurels as a woman-killer, and are fond of displaying their scalps. They never—or hardly ever—adore one woman at a time, but carry on as many flirtations as they can keep going, and in course of time they become very dexterous at managing that each lady shall believe she is the only star in their firmament. They have often a minute and intricate knowledge of matters sartorial, and where a young man could only say that you were dazzling in something white and gauzy, your middle-aged man could probably describe the creation accurately down to the smallest details of trimming and accessories generally—not forgetting the price per yard. Of course,

Betty, you understand I'm talking generalities only, there are always exceptions to everything, but we are not concerning ourselves with them now."

"Quite. Go on," said Betty.

"Well then, the old men—and I mean by that anything over fifty"—and I thought of Colonel Walter again—"why they are *dears*, Betty. They may like you awfully, but they never try to kiss you, and they're just as kind and dear as they can be, and just think only about what is good for you and how they can help you, and all that sort of thing, and you feel so beautifully happy and restful and at home with them all the time, and can tell them anything."

"Who is it?" said Betty.

I never hide anything from Betty. It's no use trying, so I told her "Colonel Walter" at once.

"I knew it was," she said. "Well, jewel, I shall be more than interested to know if your ideas on the last division of your list remain unchanged, and especially in this particular case. If they should ever for any reason alter, will you mind telling me?"

"Why, not a bit—I *know* they won't. I'd trust him before every soul in this world, except Peter, of course. Betty, *why* do you laugh so? Have you a different opinion of old men?"

"Different?" Betty laughed with her head thrown well back. She has the most ripping round white throat I ever saw.

"Why, jewel, if you put your opinion down at Hong-Kong and mine here, they wouldn't be far enough apart. That's what I think with *one* exception," and her face

went suddenly quite grave. Then I remembered that her husband had been an old man.

I said to myself that I should always have Colonel Walter to bear out my theory, even if he proved in my case also, to be the "one exception."

CHAPTER VIII

THE next day I went to see my doctor-man—Sir Norman Macky. I still had to go every week, and Betty and I used to motor into Dublin on these occasions, and get through a good deal of shopping—at least Betty did—but I was generally kept in durance vile for hours. Sir Norman is a very big doctor, and has a gay habit of keeping one waiting ages after one's appointment.

The last few visits though, I had noticed that I was sent in several turns ahead of my proper one. Although this was pleasing in one way, it was also uncomfortable, as one felt that deadly hatred and awful indignation must be projected vio-

lently by those patients whose turn one had usurped. I always feel antagonism in a moment when I am in a room with it.

This particular day, I met Sir Norman on the doorstep, and he told me he was just back from his rounds. He was very genial and charming to me, as he always is. The waiting-room, when I reached it, was absolutely lined with females. I hate doctors' waiting-rooms. I never can help thinking of all the nasty sick people who have sat on my chair before me, and speculating on what particular form of ailment they have been blessed—or rather—cursed with. I disconsolately fell into a chair bemoaning in my mind a fate which would patently keep me chained to that spot for hours, when the servant opened the door and called out my name. I was distinctly

conscious of the blackness and greenness of jealous rage which was silently hurled at me by the occupants of that chamber as I left it, and fairly quaked until the closed door was between me and it. Sir Norman is a genial old man, as I have already said. He held my hand for quite a long time when I came in, and squeezed it. He is quite, quite old, sixty, I should think —is short, broad and fat, with a bald head, a white beard, and a red cheery old face. He had always adopted a fatherly sort of manner— and I looked upon him as a nice, kind old thing.

"I've come in my wrong place," I said.

"You're the right person in the wrong place," said Sir Norman, with a charming smile, and proceeded to feel my pulse, after which he con-

tinued to hold my hand, as he always did—while he asked the idiotic questions that doctors do, ascertained the colour of my tongue, and various other uninteresting and unedifying details of my interior economy.

Then I asked him when I should be quite well, and he said he couldn't say definitely, but that I was going on splendidly. He asked was I in a hurry to leave Ireland, and I said no, not specially, but that I was in a hurry to be quite fit again. To which he said "more haste less speed," and that I must not think of returning to India yet awhile. I said that I should not go back till the autumn, and just then I realized that he was still holding my hand and staring rather, so I pulled it away and stood up saying I must go now. He got up too, and before

one could breathe, put his arm round me and gave me a kiss. I was so angry I couldn't speak, and we stood looking at each other. He was, I remember, purple from the top of his bald head to where his chin disappeared beneath his beard, and his eyes were all glassy-looking. I remembered that there was a tumbler of water on the table. Without speaking I pulled out my handkerchief, dipped it in the water, carefully washed the place where he had kissed me, and dried it. He didn't say a word. I pulled down my veil, picked up my purse, and then said—

"Of course, I know I must seem like your granddaughter, but it would be as well to remember that I'm not," and I walked out of the door with my chin in the air and the most dignified rustle I could get out

of my skirts, which was not nearly as much as I should have liked. Skirts are cussèd things. When one particularly wants them to make no sound they swish loudly, and if one wants a good rousing noise out of them they do not play up. This, though, is by the way.

I was trembling all down when I got into the street. Luckily for me, Betty appeared at that moment in the car and took me up. I poured it all out to her, fairly crying with rage and upsetedness.

Betty was just beautifully soothing. She always is. I said I should never go to him again, and she said certainly not. Then we forsook the subject by mutual consent.

Afterwards, when we were having tea in Betty's cosy drawing-room, I said to her—

"What on earth can have made

Sir Norman so extraordinary, do you think, Betty?"

"Extraordinary?" Betty's eyebrows went up. "He wasn't extraordinary, jewel—he was just human."

"Doctors have no right to be—human—to their patients," I said.

"Quite true," said Betty; "but in spite of etiquette and conventionality and all that sort of thing, sometimes the 'human' will out."

"When a man is old and bald and has a white beard," I flared out, "and—and a red face and a—yes—a corporation, Betty—what right has he to be 'human'?"

"Dear lamb," she said, "the older, and the balder, and the more be-corporationed they are, the more 'human' do they become."

Then I remembered our talk of the evening before. Because Betty was

Betty, she had omitted to say, "I told you so."

Well—in spite of this my faith in "the one exception" was unshaken —and unshakable.

CHAPTER IX

It was two days after this that I got a frantic letter from Norah. Her husband had been ordered to Egypt at a moment's notice and she was going with him. The children were just sailing for England in charge of their nurse. Would I take a house for them in the Isle of Wight and settle them into it. She herself would be home in three months or so.

Now how thoughtless people are. First of all the War Office people, who appear to me to take a positively fiendish delight in chasing people—"married families" for choice—from pillar to post all over the civilized and uncivilized parts of the globe. I should like to get one or two of the military big-wigs who

coolly give orders for all this family-posting, choosing those with the greatest number of children, ranging from say eight years old down to infants in arms—twins in long clothes it should be if I could discover them—and send them careering about to all the most distant stations, for a year on end, giving them eight or twelve weeks in each place. Thus, having arrived at Gibraltar, with uniform for home stations, and wife and children's clothes all carefully chosen for the place and climate, I would after waiting till they had furnished and settled nicely into their quarters, order Mr. War Office Big-Wig to Bombay—at a moment's notice. He would have to sell his furniture at a loss, also his gees. He would then have to post off, leaving wife and general impedimenta to follow. Arrived in India,

behold him compelled to invest in uniform for tropical stations. New house, new furniture, new gees. Family and impedimenta arrive wanting new clothes down to the baby or the twins. Think of the cursing and swearing! Then a short interval, and he is requested to report himself at Bermuda—at a moment's notice!!

I think that if this method were tried steadily for a bit the War Office would begin to show a little of that consideration for the married officer which it at present so completely lacks.

It was thoughtless of Norah too. I've never taken a house in my life, and I am completely unfamiliar with the Isle of Wight.

There was no time to be lost, as the children apparently might arrive at any moment.

Betty and I packed, that is, we compelled my trunks to contain my possessions in the space of an hour. Betty motored me into Kingstown, and I was hustled on board the mail-boat just as she was starting, and with no time to say good-bye. Had I been with any one but Betty, I should not have been ready to start till the moment I was now due to arrive at Holyhead. That is another good thing about Betty. She never wastes time in thinking and planning. She simply acts—and she always arrives.

It was a jolly bright day, and I settled myself on deck with a rug and a book, cast an eye upon the other passengers, decided that they were all more or less uninteresting, and read uninterruptedly for—I suppose —an hour.

Quite suddenly some one stopped

beside my chair, and involuntarily I looked up. He was a middle-aged man in well-cut clothes and a Homburg hat, which he raised in a quiet well-bred way. I further remarked that he possessed good teeth and a pleasant voice as he said what a good crossing we were having, and we were talking happily in five minutes. He was so middle-aged and quiet, and so patently of one's own set, that it never occurred to me to be on my guard in any way.

After a while the luncheon gong went, and I begged him to go and get some lunch, as I meant to stay on deck and feed later on the train. He still stayed though, chatting away very charmingly, and by this time—though I didn't notice it till later—he had possessed himself of the fact that I was a grass-widow, and that I was staying for the night at a hotel

in town on my way through to the South of England. Once more I begged him to go to lunch while there was still any to be had, and he rose slowly to go. Then he paused, and looking at me in a contemplative sort of way he said—

"Do you know what I've been thinking? It is that it would be so much nicer for you to break your journey than to go on to town to-night."

"*Break my journey!*" I said blankly in italics—"Why?"

He regarded my mystified face for a second, then said, "Oh, nothing. Simply I was mad for the moment, I suppose," and he turned and went.

Horrid qualms seized me—I shivered all over. Something said to me that he meant I might break the journey with him. Shades of Peter and every one else. I fairly crept. What

a fool to chatter unthinkingly to a complete stranger. I began to see as I reviewed our conversation how cleverly he had extracted the facts of my being alone and not going to friends in town that night. Oh, what a juggins! Yet he was so old—at least elderly—and also so thoroughly a gentleman. He had told me he was an Etonian and an Oxford man, and the name of his place in Ireland. How impossible—could I perhaps have been talking to a harmless lunatic? But no—I could not persuade myself that that was so—I crept afresh. I would go and hide in the ladies' cabin in company with my dressing-case which I had left there, and I clutched my rug and book and started to flee. But after three steps I stopped. Who was this *creature* that he should frighten me off the deck and make me go and hide? Let

him go to the devil! No man living should make me afraid. I'd stay and brave him out, and down I sat firmly. The next moment my friend of the Homburg hat appeared.

Might he not bring me some soup or some biscuits?

"No thank you."

It distressed him that I should be so long without lunch.

Faint and chilling laughter.

He—subsiding into a chair alongside me—had been thinking of me all lunch time, and the more he thought the more he saw what a pity it was that I should not break my journey, say at Holyhead, or somewhere near there.

Eyebrows raised to the hair-line.

He thought it was so tiring for me to do such a long journey all at once.

I was accustomed to far longer

journeys—and in any case I liked long journeys—moreover I was never tired.

Had I seen anything of North Wales?

I had not.

There were charmingly comfortable hotels at many charming places thereabouts.

I didn't doubt it.

He edged a little nearer as he brought himself to confide that he had taken a great fancy to me and was sure that we should get on splendidly together. Would I not allow him to chaperone me in one of these charming spots for a day or so?

A face of white and cold disdain.

Very hastily. Of course I quite understood that he was merely asking for my companionship—not anything else—not anything worse.

My expression at once conveyed

that no idea of the contrary had entered my head for a moment.

Well, what could be the objection to so charming an arrangement? He would have the immense satisfaction of my society—while the poor return of his protection would be mine.

I was in a hurry to get on. It was in fact quite impossible for me to contemplate the idea for a moment.

There was perhaps some one else coming to meet me in town?

Certainly not.

Had I not told him I had been ill? A day or two in those charming regions, it seemed, would be of incalculable benefit to me, besides saving me the fatigue of this long journey.

I could not for a moment contemplate the idea.

He would at any rate give me the advantage of his protection to town

then. It was difficult for him to express the satisfaction he would derive from my companionship *en route*, and a London hotel was a lonely place for one so young and so—well, for me, in fact.

I became rigid with terror. It appeared—rather suddenly and vehemently I must own—that I was to dine with a grandmother and an aunt that very night. Besides which, absolute *hordes* of aunts, grandmothers, and other relations were to await my arrival at Euston.

Under these circumstances he would perhaps be superfluous?

He had stated the facts accurately.

Well, if I returned to Ireland later would I let him know?

Certainly—if I remembered (and might I be forgiven the lie).

He felt that I was so sympathetic, and so charming, and so altogether

delightful, that nothing could afford him so much satisfaction as to have me for a companion—only if this beautiful situation should ever occur, I must not allow him to get fond of me. I must snub him severely if he attempted it.

With emphasis I here remarked that I should.

And I—did I think there would be any chance of my getting fond of him?

With increased emphasis "not the very slightest," I said cruelly.

He sighed regretfully, regarded me with a sad and reflective eye, and—

"I'm afraid you are in love with some one," said this astounding man.

"I think I have told you that I am married," I disdainfully said.

"Oh, that had very little to do

with it," he assured me, "married people hardly ever loved each other."

"Well," I said deliberately, "if I weren't married, and if I weren't in love with my husband, and if I lived a million years, I would never love you."

He laughed a little, said that I was cruel, but that I had promised to let him know when I was next in Ireland, and he would then give himself the honour of waiting on me. He had a motor-car which he would be glad to put at my service. In the meantime, would I give him my address? If he were in town he would like to call on me.

I could not refuse, but I was hard put to it.

"Give me your note-book," I said suddenly, "and I will write it down for you."

He did so, and I wrote—

C/o MESSRS. GRIGLEY & Co.,
54, Lombard Street,
E.C.

"They are my agents," I said, handing it back and noting with glee his disappointed face. "My plans are so unsettled just now that it's the only permanent address I can give you."

Then I told him that I must go and fetch my dressing-case from below as we were nearly in, and I departed, reflecting with inward chuckles that man-like he was bound to forget to give me his address, and that I should therefore be unable to fulfil my promise of letting him know when next I was in Ireland.

I stayed down in the cabin as long as I could, and then with the pier in

sight got a sailor to carry my things up on deck.

My friend stood waiting at the head of the companion. He would see after my luggage for me.

Many thanks.

He had decided to accompany me part of the way. My terror returned. I knew the fear of the hunted thing in that moment.

I was perfectly able to take care of myself.

Ah no. Apparently I was not. He must satisfy himself that I was safe.

I began to despair. I should have to appeal to the guard or somebody —and think of the horrid publicity of it. Then he stood close by my side, and poured out burning words in an unending stream. He loved me. Why was I so uncaring? He couldn't bear to leave me. He had lost his heart.

I turned upon him—I laughed cuttingly. Did he think I was such a fool as to believe him? How was it possible that he should love a person he had only just met?

It happened sometimes, he said, and his mouth twitched, and his eyes were pink-lined all over.

I was his darling—his child—his childie—his dearest one. Oh, but I was nearly sick.

He took hold of my arm with horrid hot hands, and I tore it away. We were alongside the pier, and in the group of waiting people my eye suddenly lighted on one familiar figure. It seemed too good to be possible.

"Colonel Walter," I gasped, and I was nearly crying. I pushed my way to the taffrail, regardless of the mutely wondering and injured people with whom I collided.

"Colonel Walter," I called, and my hands went out to him imploringly without my meaning them to a bit. He saw that trouble was afoot. The smile left his dear kind face, and he was across the gangway before it was well in position and holding my two hands—oh, so kindly and protectingly.

"Stay with me," I said, "oh, I want you—and don't go away."

"My child," he said very gently, "I will do anything I can to help you and will come with you, if you wish it, to town."

"Thank heaven!" I said, "thank heaven!" and I clung to his hands.

My friend in the Homburg hat stood before us.

"I forgot to give you this," he said, handing me a slip of paper. "Good-bye, and *bon voyage*. And

had you only explained that you had already arranged for a cavalier——"

He raised his hat and was gone.

His name and address were written on the slip of paper.

"Pig!" I said, and tore it in pieces and threw them over the side. He looked back and saw me. I was glad.

CHAPTER X

We were alone in a first-class carriage, and as the train drew out of Holyhead station, Colonel Walter looked at me for a minute.

"I have never been so glad to see any one in all my life before," I said slowly.

An ache came in my throat, and a horrid squirming quivering about the lips. I knew I was going to cry, yet knowing could not have stopped, even to save Peter from death by horrid tortures.

How bound and helpless we human beings are!

"Oh," I said with that horrid uncertain sound of the voice, when one doesn't know a bit what key the next word will come in, "if you knew

how beautiful it is to be safe with you." Down went my face on his shoulder, and I cried hard and stormily and helplessly like a great idiot for nearly five minutes.

He didn't fuss, nor ask me what was the matter, nor try to look at me, nor beg me to stop, nor any of the stupid flustered things nearly all men would have done. He just put one arm round me, and with his other hand patted my shoulder now and then in just the most comforting way in the world. After a bit, when I could trust my voice more or less and found my handkerchief and dried my eyes, I told him the whole thing. He was quite quiet, and didn't speak till I had finished, and then suddenly he put his arms tight round me and spoke under his breath, and I could feel his chest going up and down in great pants.

"Damn him," he said, "damn him—blackguard!"

I had never heard anything like his voice—I looked up at him. His face was perfectly cold and hard and white, but his eyes were very bright and reminded me of the light magnesium wire makes when it's burning.

"Ah, don't," I said.

His face softened then, he let me go and smiled at me.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He leant back in his corner, and presently there came a great sigh, and his hand came over mine as if somehow it put itself there without his being able to stop it.

"Child, if I could only take care of you," he said.

He was taking care of me, I told him.

"Just for a little while," he said,

and I saw the sad little smile I remembered under his nice grey moustache. Somehow I felt that he wanted comforting, and I took his hand in both of mine and stroked it.

"I love to have you to take care of me. I wish I could stay with you till Peter comes home," I said. "Oh, Colonel Walter, I forgot to ask you why you were at Holyhead!"

He pulled away his hand, and got up and lowered the window before he spoke, and I saw that his hands were trembling.

"I was inspecting at Chester yesterday," he said, and his voice was all rough and funny, "and so I just came on to Holyhead to get a whiff of the sea and have a look round."

"I'm glad you did," I said. "What *should* I have done without you? And it was dear of you to

think of it, Colonel Walter, and I can never thank you properly."

He came over to my seat, sat down beside me, took my two hands, and looked me very steadily in the eyes.

"I want you to understand something," he said, in a patient sort of way, as if I were being very dense about something I ought to understand quite easily. "You must never thank me or tell me I'm kind for anything that I ever do for you. That's the first thing." He laughed a little, but he looked very sad.

"You understand that? Very well, now this is the next thing. I like to do things for you. I like it—well—more than a great many things, so you must ask me always whenever there is anything you want done. Will you promise me this?"

I nodded.

"Honest Injun," I said; "but,

Colonel Walter, it is so frightfully nice of you."

"Not a bit," he said gravely. "I can't help it. If I could, I most probably should. It would spare me—a good deal. But I'm talking riddles, my child."

"It is a little difficult to follow," I admitted.

"Let us go and get lunch," said Colonel Walter, leading the way down the corridor.

CHAPTER XI

I WAS very tired that night.

Colonel Walter put me into a cab at Euston, having made me promise to go to bed directly after dinner, and himself went off to his club, where he was staying for the night. I had decided that Bembury, in the Isle of Wight, would be the nicest place for the children and me, and I knew a very jolly hotel there where I could stay while I was house-hunting.

Very curiously, Colonel Walter had just been given a billet at Portsmouth, so would be quite close to us —only just across the Solent. He seemed tremendously glad when I told him whither I was bound. He also said, that as he was going to

Portsmouth the next day, he would come on to Bembury and see about house-agents for me, and make things as easy for me as he could. As I had never taken a house in my life, and as there was very little time —the children arriving in two days —I was most grateful to him. He is the very kindest man I ever knew. It simplifies things so when some one comes and takes over all the hard part. We met at Waterloo early the next morning, and got down to Bembury by lunch-time. Colonel Walter went off directly after lunch armed with all sorts of information derived from the hotel proprietor as to house-agents, etcetera, leaving me to rest.

Two hours later he reappeared, having discovered, he thought, the very thing I wanted, and obtained permission for me to see over it at

once. We had tea on the verandah, and started off. It was a perfectly dear house, with a ripping garden and walls all round. So I said I would take it on the spot, and sat in the garden while Colonel Walter went with the agent to arrange all the business part. I had no idea what a great deal of business part there was, till he told me about it afterwards, when we had got back to the hotel and I found that he had made a far better bargain than I should ever have thought of making for myself, and had saved me being let in in all sorts of ways that would never have entered my head. I began to thank him, but he stopped me, reminding me of my promise.

"Oh but," I said, "what can I do? I *must* say something. Just think of all you have done for me, and how hopelessly at sea I should

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have been if I had tried to do it alone."

He laughed, and said I must manage to carry on without saying anything, and that he had enjoyed doing it all. And then it was time for him to go, and I suddenly felt very miserable and forlorn as I realized that I should be left all alone.

"I wish you could stay too," I said to him, when he had paid his bill and came to say good-bye in the big empty drawing-room. "It's so horrid to be all alone."

Tears came into my eyes in the idiotic way they will just at the most awkward moments, but we were in a shadowy corner, and I prayed he might not see them.

"If it were in any way possible I would stay," he said. "But although I am so much older

than you, Mrs. Grundy would not approve."

"She is a stupid old thing," I said, and laughed a little so that he shouldn't know I wanted to cry. It was rather a mistake, because instead of a proper laugh it ended in a silly little sobbing noise.

He flinched, as if some one had hurt him. Then he took my hand, and stooped and kissed it without a word and went quickly away. I felt that I would have liked to give him a good hug.

I went into the house the next day. I had arranged to take on the owner's servants with it, so there was nothing to wait for. I wired to the children's nurse at Southampton telling her where to come when their ship arrived, and then spent the time in picking flowers and arranging them, and eating strawberries and

lying in a hammock in the garden. It was warm and lovely, and everything was green and cool, and I felt I'd be content to stay there always if I had some one to keep me company.

CHAPTER XII

THERE was, I discovered, a yacht club down near the beach, and the club house looked so delightful, that I wrote to Colonel Walter, asking how I could become a member.

He wrote back that he, being a member, had put my name up, and that I need not wait to be formally elected, but could use the club at once.

I determined to go that very day, so after lunch, having put on a fresh muslin frock and a big white hat, I started off.

The club seemed to be empty when I got there. I wandered in, and meeting a youthful person, whom I took to be a servant of the establishment, inquired of him where the

ladies' reading-room might be. He indicated a room at the end of the passage, and I proceeded to establish myself there. It was a nice, cool room, and in a deep arm-chair, surrounded by papers of every description, I was more than content. By and by I saw matches and an ash-tray close at hand. Excellent! Members then were allowed to smoke here. My cigarette-case was tucked into my belt, as it always was. In two seconds I was enveloped in smoke, and more contented than ever. A familiar magenta-pink paper next caught my eye. This was rather curious, I thought. Were the Bembury ladies a very go-ahead set? I had never seen the Pink-un outside masculine precincts before. I felt horribly tempted to peep at it, but decided not to, as some one might come in and I shouldn't like

to be seen reading it. There was an apricot-coloured paper just beneath it. I had never seen it before, so came to the conclusion that it must be a new one. It was called *The Winning Post*. I picked it up, and was quickly immersed. It seemed rather vulgar—but—oh—very funny. A giggle broke out of me quite against my will, and then—oh this was awful. What an *extraordinary* paper! What an extraordinary club to allow it in the ladies' reading-room! What extraordinary ladies to want to have it! I suddenly felt furious—I sprang up, seized the paper, tore it in half, and hurled the fragments across the room.

"Well, I'm blowed!"

It was a masculine voice, and a masculine figure loomed in the doorway as I hurriedly turned round. We stood and stared at each other

for a second, I with my cigarette in my mouth. Never have I seen so much petrified amazement on any human face before or since. The intruder being clearly beyond speech, I felt that it rested with me to do something to relieve the situation. I took the cigarette out of my mouth, flicked the ash with my little finger, just to show that I—at any rate—felt quite at my ease; looked at him underneath my eyelashes over my shoulder, and said haughtily—

"I don't know what *you're* doing in the ladies' reading-room."

"Good Lord!" gasped the man.

"Do you feel faint?" I asked icily, "because if you do I'll ring for some water—or sit on your head —whichever brings you round the quickest."

"Bless my *soul*," he said slowly

and with emphasis, "*bless* my soul —bless *my* soul," and then he burst into such shouts of laughter that he must have been heard a mile off.

I began to get tired of this man, who was clearly a lunatic of an unusual type. So I sat down again, picked up a paper, and continued to smoke.

"When you feel better," I said in my most dignified voice, and looking down my nose at him, "I hope you will go away."

At that moment an approaching footstep was heard. The man stopped laughing, came into the room, shut the door, and stood with his back against it. He was a big, broad young man, and I calculated that if his intention was to keep out any one who tried to enter, he would probably find no difficulty in carrying it out. The footsteps, how-

ever, passed, and I returned to the charge.

"May I inquire to what I owe this unwarrantable intrusion?" I asked him, as I blew out a stream of smoke, and looked up at him from under the brim of my hat.

He was a very good-looking man, straight too, and well dressed, and he was looking at me as a dog does at a fresh juicy bone. I noticed that he had dark eyes, and felt vaguely sorry—I have never cared for dark eyes. Blue are the nicest, but grey can be quite nice. Of course I'm only considering men's eyes.

"May I inquire," he asked in a very pleasant, deep voice, "if you have been a member of this club for long?"

"I really can't see how that affects you," I said disdainfully, "but since nothing important depends on it, I

don't mind telling you that I've only just been put up for it."

"Oh," he said, and came and sat down near me.

"I didn't invite you in here," I said, lifting my eyebrows, "and of course I can't turn you out, but—perhaps you will inform me how long you intend to remain?"

He stood up and bowed.

"Until you feel inclined to go," he said.

"But I quite fail to see what my going or staying has to do with it."

"Well, you see"—and he bent a little nearer—"some other chap might be rude if he came and found you here."

"And you are being polite?"

He bowed, without speaking.

"Are all the men in the club in the habit of coming in here?" I asked sarcastically.

"They are," he answered.

"What a very extraordinary club," I vehemently said, "and what very extraordinary ladies to let them."

"Well, you see," he said smiling, and showing very nice teeth, "*they* haven't any say in the matter."

I became more bewildered every moment. There was a great tramping down the passage. The man got up hastily.

"I should like you to see the view from the verandah," he said; "will you come?"

Instinct told me to acquiesce. We went out through the French window, and the moment after the room was full of footsteps and men's voices. We walked without speaking to the end of the verandah, and then I was pulled up short by a glimpse through the windows of a

dainty room full of ladies reading and writing.

"Why are all the ladies in there?" I wondered.

"It's their room," he said quietly, looking down at me with a great laugh at the back of his eyes.

"*What?*" I cried; and that moment it dawned on me what I had done.

"Oh," I said, crimson in a moment, "why *didn't* you tell me before?"

"But really, you never gave me a chance," he pleaded.

I turned to fly.

"Ah, don't go—*please*," he begged, but I was down the steps and out of the gate and away like the wind.

CHAPTER XIII

NORAH'S children came the next day: tired, shy and apparently tongueless—or almost. Having extracted from one in skirts and a mass of brown curls that its name was Violet and its age six years, and failed to elicit any sort of remark from a smaller one in knickerbockers, I dispatched the whole party to the nursery to do what it liked, to the palpable relief of the nurse, who forthwith deposited both infants to bed.

I woke next morning with a feeling of something unaccustomed having roused me, which, as my mind became lucid, explained itself. A shrill, thin little voice was singing overhead at extreme speed, and

with immense vigour. This is what it sang—

"Oh, I *love* to think of Jesus as he sat beside the sea
And taught the little boys and girls how good they ought to be.
I *love* to think of Jesus as he sat beside the sea.
I climbed up a tree on a caterpillar's back
Singing 'Polly Wolly Doodle' all the day.
Oh, I *love*, etc." *Da capo ad inf.*

Till there broke in Nurse's voice—

"Master Lionel, will you stop that noise, you'll wake your aunt. Give over this minute."

"Bother," replied the same high little voice, with immense distinctness and a certain quaint deliberation of utterance. "I like singing, Nurse. I spect she's quite sound asleep, silly old fing, and *snawing*."

"Oh, but she isn't!" I called up, opening my door. "Come down

and see if she's sound asleep and *snawing*."

Silence, and next two minute figures in pyjamas and slippers came hopping down the stairs and advanced shyly into my room as I held the door open.

I had some chocolates for them, and in a second or two they were perched on my bed talking at express speed and asking question after question. They liked my room, they said, and my hair was nice, wasn't it, Lionel? all tumbly about like that—and my nighty was pretty, and Mummie had blue bows on hers just the same. Nurse, I was informed, looked "a awful objec" in bed. Her grey hair was all "*scooed* up," and she went to bed in her machise, Aunt Gabewell, and not no lace on it either. Thereafter the smaller creature whose name was Lionel,

and whom I discovered to be the owner of the thin little voice, pointed a small finger at the wall above my head and inquired, in his quaint and peculiarly deliberate way, "Why the lady hadn't got no clothes on?"

It was a study of the nude by a well-known artist. I said she had been having a bath. Did I look like that, they gravely wished to know, when I had no clothes on? "Oh yes," I said, "I guessed so." They regarded me with slightly awed gravity as I made this damaging admission, and finally Lionel delivered himself of a remark to the effect that it was beyond words sad that I, who looked so nice in clothes, could be so fearsome an object without them. Small Violet, though manifestly of the same opinion, anxiously sought to smooth down the rudeness of this remark to save

my feelings; as for me, I laughed till I cried, and the children ended by laughing with me.

We continued the very best of friends.

They were the quaintest children. Their vocabulary included the most curious biblical expressions, and some startling swear words, a somewhat astounding combination, and collected, I discovered, from "Daddy" and their worthy and ancient nurse respectively. She—good old soul—had most original methods of punishment, and never shall I forget the occasion when going into the nursery at twelve in the morning I discovered Nurse severely silent, stitching away at the table, and Violet in bed crimson with mortification, while suspended over her on a nail in the wall was a large illuminated card, bearing the

words, "Rend your hearts and not your garments." This, I was told, was the justly merited reward of a little girl who had torn her frock, her pinafore, and her stocking all in one morning; "and," added Lionel, who stood sympathetically by, in a loud and deliberate whisper, "Aunt Gabewell, *all* the sit-down side of her drawers as well."

They burst upon me one day while I was dressing at eight a.m., shrieking with excitement, and carrying between them a large glass jam jar full of green pond water and numberless slimy little betailed newts. They implored me to come and look at their "beautiful fishes," and while I—tooth-brush in hand—inspected the loathly reptiles, there ensued a fight between them which ended in a crash, and a deluge on the carpet of glass, water, and newts.

Lionel trod upon and squashed the nearest, and promptly sat down in the midst of the remainder to weep over its mangled remains. I may here remark that the full tale of newts was never made up, and for nights I crept into bed in terror of finding a slimy thing crawling upon me. After that they begged me to let them have some sweet little white mice, which were to be had in a shop in the village. I steadily refused this request, for though, as I gently explained, I didn't mind two white mice, I thought we didn't want several hundred of them, and, sweet and delightful as they doubtless were, they had a thoughtless way of increasing their numbers in a very prolific manner. The result was that one day the children came home triumphantly with two smelly little quadrupeds, which the shopman had

faithfully promised would indulge in no young ones. Nurse wore an outraged and martyred look, and I divined that the conversation over the purchase had been trying to her modest mind.

The only disappointing circumstance was, that when the next day dawned a bevy of wee mouselings adorned the cage.

"And the shopman said God wouldn't send them *any* baby mice when we asked him," said Violet, regarding them with a beatific smile, and Lionel "expected that God thought he'd do it in the night for a beautiful s'prise." Upon the face of Nurse every variety of maidenly reserve and patient repression was manifest.

CHAPTER XIV

"AUNT GABIE," they asked me one day, "don't you think God must be very cold in heaven? You see"—as I looked mystified—"the devil has got all the fire."

Feeling unable to discuss this burning question dispassionately I sent them to play in the garden.

The sound of a chant, sung slowly and untunefully, smote my ear anon. I prospected from the window and saw that church was in progress. Violet in a nightdress and black sash was the parson mounted upon a tree-stump, while the congregation in the person of Lionel stood below. They both held books, and swayed slowly from side to side as they sang. Immense solemnity characterized them, till an unusually pierc-

ing false note from the congregation upset the parson's equilibrium.

"You're singin' it wrong," shrieked the parson, with intense irritation.

"I aren't," responded the congregation stolidly, and continued lustily to sing, the parson, after a moment's indecision, joining in. But in two minutes his book pursued a swiftly erratic course across the grass.

"I can't sing with that noise going on," he remarked to the congregation, with withering contempt.

"It's just the same noise as you make," the congregation replied, and continued; "and anyway I like singin'," it paused to remark, and continued once more.

"Well, you've got to stop, because now it's time for the lesson," admonished the parson, but this

trenchant remark had no effect whatsoever upon the congregation. There ensued babel, as the parson shouted the lesson and the congregation sang the chant simultaneously.

The lesson won, and the congregation, apparently weary of the contest, dropped into its seat and listened.

"And behold the prodigal son was full of want," declaimed the parson in stentorian tones, "and verily, verily I say unto you, he had nothing at all to eat but the swine's pig-wash——"

"Ugh! how disgustin' you are," remarked the congregation.

"It's quite true, you silly boy," contended the parson hotly. "It says so in the Bible."

"Now then, Miss Violet and Master Lionel," called Nurse, "come and get dressed to go out,

and stop that 'orrid noise, do. How your aunt puts up with it is more than I can tell."

"Pooh!" said the congregation and parson scornfully, "she's not a proper aunt—not the Aunt Arabella sort of aunt, you know, Nurse."

"I like this sort of aunt," said the parson.

"Yes," agreed the congregation, "she sits on the floor and plays with us. And she drops her pudding down the front of her blouse sometimes."

"And she doesn't say, 'children must be seen and not heard,' nor keep your dirty fingers off her books and things, and she *likes* Violet with untidy hair best, Nurse," said the parson.

"And she's got nice pink cheeks," the congregation contributed.

"And pretty frocks," the parson added. At this point the two pairs of brown shoes and socks vanished from the sight of the highly appreciative aunt.

They were conducting a funeral when I came in that evening, "just for something to do," they explained.

The Golliwog had been the victim. Lionel, with his funny, little, freckled face all twinking, came to explain to me—

"Aunt Gabie, the Golliwog's grey hair fell down with sorrow to the grave."

Such quaint children they are, constantly coming out with some biblical expression, and then I have to implore pretty, little, dainty Violet not to say "damn" when she gets angry.

The back windows of the house

look into a side street of the village. The children love to stand on an ottoman under the window on the nursery landing and watch the exciting events in the street below. There they discovered "Rubee," and adored her straightway. All *I* could see in "Rubee" was a very plain and particularly common little village girl, with befrizzled, yellow hair. But the children found her adorable. She was beautiful, and beyond words fascinating in their eyes, for some occult reason which a mere grown-up mind failed to discover.

They would stand at the window as long as they were allowed, watching with absorption Rubee's every action as she played with the other village children. One of the greatest attractions apparently was that she wore a black frock. Mrs.

Whiffles, the cook, a huge and stolid person, possessing an intimate knowledge of the village inhabitants, was eagerly questioned by the children as to "Rubee's" history, and, above all, why she was in black.

"Because," said Mrs. Whiffles, "'er mother 'as just doid."

Two awestruck little faces regarded the stolid woman.

"Why did she die?" two scared little voices at length inquired.

"She doid," proclaimed Mrs. Whiffles triumphantly, "in a fit," and complacently looked down at those two poor shrinking little mites as one who would say—

"There, there's a magnificently sensational tit-bit for you."

The time had come, I thought, in fact was overdue, for ending the conversation.

When they went to bed they

brought two little articles and, hugging them affectionately as in farewell, laid them down on my knee.

Might they give them to Rubee? they shyly wanted to know.

"You see, Aunt Gabie," explained Violet, with big, misty eyes, "we're so sorry for poor little Rubee. Her mother is dead, and Rubee can't see her any more because they've put her in the grave-garden."

CHAPTER XV

Two or three days after the children's arrival I had a visitor.

The maid brought me a card, inscribed "Mr. Bertrand Greatorex." I was puzzled, for I could remember no one of that name. But when I entered the drawing-room the mystery was solved—my acquaintance of the Sailing Club was there.

He was charmingly agreeable. Hoped I did not look upon his call as an intrusion, but that he wanted to meet me again so much, and it had, of course, been easy to discover who I was and where I was staying. I made myself quite nice to him, because a retrospect of our first meeting forced me to the conclu-

sion that I had made a fool of myself, whereas he had behaved very decently.

We got on splendidly. He had quite nice brown eyes and black hair, and was straight and broad-shouldered, and clean-looking. There was something very jolly about him. We had tea very gaily, and then we smoked, and then the children came in. By that time he was looking into my eyes all the while, and so I couldn't help flickering my eyelashes a good deal. I don't think he was pleased at the interruption, but I was glad, as I was getting a bit bored.

Soon afterwards he got up to go, and as he said "good-bye," asked if I would come to a tea-party he was giving at his cottage the next day. I said I would be delighted, and so it was arranged.

The following afternoon, therefore, I put on a pale-blue linen frock, with the daintiest underslip of cambric and lace, a big white hat, and my smartest Gibson Girl shoes. Thus equipped I set out for the cottage. Mr. Greatorex had described its whereabouts and I soon found it, covered with roses, and surrounded by green meadows.

Before I had time to ring the bell in the tiny porch, my host stepped out of a French window three yards away.

He bowed over my hand in rather a French fashion.

"I have been counting the minutes till you could be here," he said. "I am grateful to you for not being later than you said, because I could not have waited any longer." He led the way into a tiny, very dainty room. There were

Moorish rugs on the floor, hanging from the ceiling was a quaint Chinese lantern; a broad low divan heaped with cushions ran round two sides of the room. Joss-sticks were burning before a small Buddhist shrine on a black wood table, and the piquant odour of incense pervaded the air.

"It's all ripping!" I said; "but where are the other people?"

"My tea-party is all here," said my host. "Won't you pour out tea for me?" pointing to the far end of the room, where at the angle of the divan stood a tea-table prepared for two, and beside it a kettle was hissing invitingly.

I stared at him with wide eyes. He met my look quite steadily.

"You have asked me to tea all alone in your house?" I said.

I was very angry, and very quiet;

only my hands were trembling, so I put them behind me that he might not see it, and stood straight in front of him.

"Yes," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I wanted you all alone here," he said, quite coolly, and yet courteously, and looking at me in a gentle sort of way.

"What for?" I inquired.

"I hoped you might let me kiss you if we were quite by ourselves," he answered.

"You were infinitely mistaken," I said scornfully.

"Ah, I hope not," he said, looking into my eyes and coming a step nearer.

"Keep back," I said very low.

He bowed gravely, and retreated a step.

We stood silent, facing each other.

"I'm going away," I said presently.

"Must you?" he asked, smiling in that gentle way of his, and I'm bound to admit that I found him immensely attractive.

"Yes," I said.

"I can't express to you how disappointed I am," he answered, in his thrilling voice, and with his eyes on mine.

I went back two paces.

"Please understand that you are perfectly safe here," he said quickly and very gravely.

"Yes—I feel that," I said slowly. "I—please don't think that I am afraid of you."

He looked at me very long, and without speaking. I dropped my eyes at last. I was afraid to look at him any longer.

"You witch!" he whispered then,

"you adorable, exquisite child-woman. I'd give this world to possess you for five minutes, you marvellous, soft, warm, white little female thing."

"Stop," I cried, and I shivered, "you can't say things like that to me. Remember I'm married!"

"If you were married twice over," he said, "I shouldn't care one atom. I'd give my soul for one kiss—one long kiss—God"—he flung out his arms to me—"*let* me kiss you, child—I'll give you anything in this world that you ask for in return."

"Supposing I did let you kiss me," I said very quietly, "what then?"

"What then?—God!" he muttered, and put his hand across his eyes.

After a moment or two. "You

see," I said, "that I'm right to refuse. You'll be happier in the long run without that kiss."

I stepped past him out of the window into the sunshine. He came after me. His face was white, and his eyes were covered with little red lines.

"You're quite right," he said, in a shaky voice. "Good-bye!"

"One minute before I go," I said. "Will you please tell me why you thought that I was the sort of woman who would come to tea with you alone and let you kiss me?"

"I beg your pardon," he said, very humbly.

"But you haven't answered me—why?" I insisted.

"I hoped you might not mind," he said slowly, "like—like other women. I was fool enough not to

know that you are not like other women."

"Thank you," I said, "you are forgiven."

He snatched at my hand, and was kissing it and holding it against his cheek before I could stop him.

"But I want you all the more," he said chokingly. "It makes me want you more than I can bear. Will you always be so cold and hard?"

I pulled my hand away.

"I'm not cold," I said, speaking gently, "nor hard. How stupid you are. I'm simply *married*."

I lifted my skirt, never thinking, as I turned to go, and in a second he was down on his knees holding my ankles and kissing them. I felt his hot lips on my skin through the open-work silk stockings.

I struggled. It was useless.

"Let me go," I begged, "oh, let me go."

He loosened his hands, and I turned and ran, leaving him there on the ground.

CHAPTER XVI

I FELT rather miserable and down on my luck for a day or two, and then one morning Colonel Walter came.

"You dear," I said, giving him my two hands. "I'm so glad you've come. I am so miserable."

"What's the matter, child? You're looking tired and worried," he answered.

So I told him all about the absurd mistake I had made at the club—though it wasn't really *my* mistake but the foolish small boy's—and the events it had given rise to. Only he got so angry I almost wished I hadn't told him. He stamped up and down the room, saying "damn him" and "curse him" and

"blackguard" and "brute" and all sorts of things.

At last I said, "Doctor dear, it's not a bit of good being cross about it. Come and sit down and tell me what to do. It seems to me there is nothing but trouble and bother and fuss wherever I go, and I'm getting tired of it."

He sat down beside me, and I tucked my arm into his.

"Do tell me what to do," I said, "you're the only friend I've got, and you must help me."

"The long and the short of it is that you are too young and too pretty, and men are too great brutes for it to be possible for you to go about alone," was his answer, given with a most gloomy look on his face.

"Oh rats!" I said laughing, "I'm quite old. I've been married

for years—I've got freckles and a wide mouth, and my nose turns up. Besides, I can't help being alone. Will you give me leave to go back to India at once?"

"No," he said very shortly, "I won't."

"Then why don't you come and stay with me and chaperone me?" I said banteringly.

"I wish to God I could!" was his answer.

"Well, *I* wish you could too," I said. "How ripping it would be, I like you better than any one in the world, except Peter. Why, what's the matter, Doctor dear?"

He had given a great sigh—almost a groan—that had pulled me up short.

His head was turned away, and he didn't answer me. I put up my hand and turned his face round so

that I could see it. It was all drawn and lined, and oh so unutterably sad. I jumped up and put my arm round his neck, and laid my face against his hair.

"Doctor *dear*," I said, "what is it?—oh, what is it?"

I have never been able clearly to remember how things happened after that. I only know this, I found myself held tightly in Colonel Walter's arms—strained so close to him that it hurt—and he was kissing me so fast and so hard that I could hardly breathe. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. I think it must have been the whole of two minutes before he stopped. I got to my feet and stood before him panting.

"You said—you said you wouldn't ever kiss me," I gasped out.

"God help me," he said very brokenly. There were tears running down his face.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I cried, "I'm sorry, Doctor dear, what can I do? I didn't know—I never thought," and I took one of his hands and held it against my cheek. We were silent for a moment. Then he turned away and put his arms on the sofa-back and laid his face down on them, and then came a great strangled quivering sigh. I felt that my heart would break. I knelt down beside him.

"Doctor dear," I whispered, "oh, I'm sorry! what can I do?" Still he didn't answer. I think that he couldn't speak. But he drew one hand away and laid it very tenderly on my hair. Then I burst out crying, and jumped up and ran away out of the room.

How I cried, locked into my room up-stairs.

Then I began to think things over, and saw a good deal that I ought to have seen earlier. He cared for me—I ought to have guessed. Why had I been so stupid? I had said things that must have hurt him times without number. Just now—never thinking, it's true—still, I had put my arms round his neck, and then indignantly flared out at him for kissing me. The marvel was—as I saw things now—that he had not kissed me before. I thought of all the other men I had ever known, and what I might have expected at their hands if they had cared as *he* cared, and if one half of the opportunities that had been his had come their way. Oh, I knew now, knew just from that, how much he cared—I wanted to tell

him that I understood and that I thought all the world of him for it. I was very fond of Colonel Walter, but I couldn't help loving Peter best. Colonel Walter came next, and if only he would not care so much it would be all right. I would go and talk it all out with him. It would be the best way. I had no sympathy with misunderstandings and silent heart-breaks and all that sort of thing. How much better to clear up everything by a few straight remarks on the subject.

I washed my face and powdered it, walked firmly down-stairs, opened the drawing-room door, and went in. I walked straight over to Colonel Walter.

"I want to say lots of things to you, Doctor dear," I said. "Yes —don't mind my red eyes—I've been crying." He winced a little.

"Child—I want your forgiveness," he said very humbly, "before we talk of anything else, but I am ashamed to ask you for it."

"Oh no, it's I who am ashamed," I said quickly, "and I want your forgiveness — because — because I hugged you. It was my fault you kissed me. Any man would have done it after that—only you see I never thought at the time. I apologize for doing it."

He smiled down at me, such a kind, sad smile.

"Please, don't. It made me very happy," he said.

"Do you—care for me?" I asked him, looking him very straight in the eyes.

"Yes," he quietly said, looking me equally straight back again.

"Since when?"

"Since I first saw you."

"Do you care—much?"

"More than I can ever make you understand."

"And all this time, all these months, you have never let me see that you cared. And if I hadn't hugged you just now, you would have gone on not letting me see."

"Of course," he said simply, "that is, I would have tried my level best not to let you see."

"Doctor dear," I said, "do you know that you are the best man in all the world? Why—any other man would have *tried* to make me see that he loved me. I wish I could tell you how I honour you and love you for not having done it. I love my husband better than any one in the world—but you come next, and always will. May I kiss you just once? You see—I owe you one."

He did not answer me for quite

a long time, but stood looking over my head straight down the room. At last—

"Yes, child," he said; "but not now—I—couldn't bear it."

And without looking at me, without a word of farewell, he walked to the door and went out.

CHAPTER XVII

BETTY suddenly wired to say that she was coming to stay with me.

I was enchanted. For days I had seen nothing of the only two people I knew in or near Bembury—Colonel Walter and Mr. Greatorex; life was dull to say the least of it. Betty always cheered one up. I wired back telling her to hurry, and she appeared the next day.

I looked worried and seedy, she told me, as we sat smoking after dinner: Betty in a low chair with her feet cocked up on the fender-stool, and I snuggled into a great Chesterfield couch. Then she asked me plump out what was the matter, and if she could be of any use.

I told her of my adventure with

Mr. Greatorex, but I couldn't of course tell her about Colonel Walter. For myself it would have been a relief to tell her, so I must be very womanish after all, though I always pride myself on not being. But it would not have been fair on him, and was absolutely out of the question. Over the recital of my other adventures Betty shrieked with merriment.

"What shall I do now, Betty?" I asked her.

"Invite him to tea," said Betty promptly. "If you were alone of course I should not advise it. But as I'm here to chaperone you, it will be far and away the best thing to do. You see he was very decent to you in the end. Lots of men wouldn't have been decent when once they'd got you there alone."

"Yes," I agreed, "that is so."

"I don't think I'd ask him only," went on Betty. "You would both feel awkward, and that would be a bore for me. Have some one else, Jewel. Isn't there some one else you know here? What about your unique 'old man,' Colonel Walter, can't you get him?"

I got red—luckily it was nearly dark, though. I drew hard at my cigarette before answering. Somehow the idea of Colonel Walter with any one else displeased me. I felt I should want him all alone if he came. I was just puzzling over the reason for this, when Betty recalled me to my senses.

"Are you asleep?" she inquired, peering over at me.

"No," I said. "I was dreaming, I think. Sorry, Betty. Yes, of course, there is Colonel Walter. I suppose I might ask him."

"You sound dubious," Betty said. "What is the matter, child? Had a row?"

"Oh no," I said airily, getting red again.

"And is your opinion of him as high as ever?" pursued Betty.

"Higher," I said emphatically. "Oh, Betty, I told you so—I was quite sure of him. I'm surer than ever; I *know* he is the best man in the world. He has proved himself to be the 'one exception.'"

Betty's sole rejoinder was a grunt, followed by avalanches of smoke. With her it meant a good deal. I'd have given anything to tell her all about it, but one couldn't, couldn't give away a man who had been decenter to one than anybody in the world.

"Jewel," said Betty, after a long pause, "you are not your ordinary

cheery self. Now listen to me. You need not say a word, you need not tell me a thing. I respect a woman who doesn't give away her pals to all her women friends. Most women do it, as you are aware. They make me sick. Now I've got just this to say: supposing a woman—a married woman, of course—is loved by a man, and supposing she is a decent sort, what does she go and do? She goes and makes him and herself absolutely miserable by what she calls 'playing the game.' Now there is more idiotic rot talked about this same 'playing the game' than there is about marrying your deceased wife's sister, or vivisection, or the education of the masses, or any other of the burning topics that serve as excuses for people to wrangle over. You have got your duty to your husband to remember—

I'm with you there. But what nine women out of every ten never see—I'm talking about decent sort of women, mind—is their duty to the other man, if he is a decent man."

"Oh," I said.

"Yes," said Betty, "and don't you forget that, Jewel. There is a frightful lack of imagination about the decent sort of women. They so very often lack the power of looking at a problem from more than one side. They sit and look at it hard through a fog of inherited stereotyped ideas, and are perfectly sure by the time they've finished that it only has one side. So, as a rule, they are quite successful in finding no other. *Hinc illæ lachrymæ.*"

"Betty," I said, "you talk good talk. Go on."

"I will," she said, and on she went, smoking away very daintily

as she talked while I watched her pretty feet in their dainty purple shoes and stockings up on the fender-stool, curling and twisting before the fire that I always had lighted in the evening.

"Now," continued Betty, "the duty you owe your husband depends entirely upon what sort of husband he is. In your case he is the very best sort, and you therefore owe him a great deal. If you didn't run absolutely straight I should think you were a little rotter. But you also owe the other man something, that is if he is the kind of man I take him to be. So what I set out to tell you is this: make him as happy as you can—within limits. You are both of you decent sorts. Neither he nor you will go beyond them. Of course you have scruples about Peter. My dear kid, he loves you, I know, be-

yond any creature in this world; but you don't imagine, do you, that he exists for months without the joys of feminine society in some shape or form? Oh, of course, I know he is quite faithful to you, I know he will be just the same when you see him again; but you have yet to show me the man, especially when he's married and in the habit of it, who can do without jam on life's bread-and-butter in the shape of flirtation, though it may be—in Peter's case is, I know—kept strictly within limits. So, Jewel, next time you see—we'll name no names—balance things in your mind, and *don't* be unimaginative. It's such hard lines for him."

Betty is marvellous. How does she manage to know things without being told them? I felt a little sore about Peter, though; I wondered

who he flirted with, and how much he flirted, and I wondered, supposing he kept a true and faithful diary like mine, would he be able to let me read it all? Ah——

CHAPTER XVIII

THEY came to tea a day or two later.

Betty is a ripping person to help run things, always bubbling over as she is with fun and good-heartedness.

Colonel Walter was just his usual cheery, courteous, good-looking self. As I watched him half gravely and half gaily returning Betty's chaff, I thought how hard it was to imagine him as I had last seen him.

Betty tried to take on Mr. Greatorex, leaving Colonel Walter to me, but my brown-eyed friend thought otherwise, and skilfully managed to evade her and monopolize me. He was so charming and

so gay and amusing that I'm bound to admit I found him delightful. What vexed me rather was the way he smiled at one and looked into one's eyes. It was patent for any one to see. He certainly made no attempt at concealing it. One has often read of "burning eyes." I began to understand what was meant by a phrase that had always struck me as absurd. I got more and more uncomfortable. One felt such a fool; I wished he would look anywhere else for a change. I felt myself "devoured" by his eyes, to use another hackneyed expression, which again I had to admit was not so senseless as it sounded. I glanced at the other two. They seemed quite absorbed in talk, and very cheerful over it; probably I was exaggerating things and being self-conscious and idiotic. I stopped worrying about

it, and gave myself up to the enjoyment of his conversation and admiration whole heartedly.

It was Betty who interrupted, quite a long while afterwards it seemed to me.

"You two have been talking to each other quite long enough," she said, in her bright decided way. "Mr. Greatorex, I'm going to carry you off to show you the garden. Colonel Walter has a great deal to discuss with Mrs. Fitz-Maurice, I know, as he is her medical guide, philosopher and friend, so we will make ourselves scarce."

They did, but even Mr. Greatorex's superb manners barely served to hide his vexation and unwillingness, of which Betty was perfectly well aware. But she took him away with the beatified expression of one conscious of conferring favours, and

trying to appear modestly unconscious of the recipient's gratitude.

Then I found myself in for it. Heavens! I had never imagined that Colonel Walter could look like that —fierce, furious, desperate, and horribly determined. He waited perfectly silent till the other two went out of sight round a corner of the house. I sat and waited too. Then he came across to me, seized my hands and held them tightly.

"Will you give me that kiss now?" he said roughly.

Resentment flamed up in me. I didn't like my kind, considerate friend in this guise. Woman-like I didn't wait to consider the cause. I was only furious at the effect.

"No," I said defiantly, "I won't!"

"Why?" he gripped my hands more tightly.

"Because I don't happen to want to," I said flippantly. He flinched.

"Yet the other day you were willing to," he said very low.

The devil entered into me. "Times change and we change with them," I said, laughing, and looking up at him under my eyelashes. He dropped my hands and turned away.

"So you are like other women, after all," he said bitterly.

I laughed, very brightly and provokingly.

"Mr. Greatorex says I'm not like other women at all," I said.

"D——"

Out it came, round and plump, and hit the quiet of the room with the turmoil and rage that had sped it.

I stood up and spoke very coldly.

"I must beg you to remember that you are with a lady," I said.

He gave me one look, and bowed —courteous to the last—walked to the door and went out. But I sank down into my chair, crying bitterly. For although he had borne himself roughly, there was in his eyes the look of a stricken thing—and it was my doing. I could imagine that look in the eyes of a dog, shot without reason by the mistress he had loved and served. And I had had no right to be angry. He would have been a poor specimen of a man if he had failed to be roused and stung by the way I had coquetted with another man in front of him. His best self would never have demanded that kiss from me. I had driven him mad—he was only a man —and had then been annoyed. How I hated myself as I huddled in the chair and sobbed.

Betty came in quickly and alone.

"Jewel," she said, "he is in the library. Go to him."

"But he's gone," I gasped.

"I stopped him," she said, "guessing what had happened. I invented an excuse and brought him back. He thinks he is waiting for a book that I've gone to fetch. Go, quick, and "—Betty looked very sad and very stern—"if you hurt him again, God forgive you, vain thoughtless child. You should thank heaven on your knees for the love of that man."

I ran out of the room, tiptoed across the hall, and creeping into the library shut the door softly behind me. I shall never forget the sight of that grey-haired, hopeless looking figure. He was standing by the window that opened to the ground. His forehead was pressed against the glass, his arms hung limply, and

there was about the shoulders a droop that was wholly pathetic. He turned and saw me, and before he had time to brace himself I was in his arms. How I kissed and hugged him, and he me. He sat down and drew me on to his knee, and I put my arms round his neck and laid my face against his, and told him how it had all come about, and how I hated myself, and how I loved him nearly as much as Peter, and didn't care one bit about any other man in the world. I couldn't help crying again as I asked him to forgive me, and he kissed me to make me stop, and stroked my hair and said very gently all the sweetest things in the world.

I have never seen a man look so radiantly happy before. Peter's face when I promised to marry him was nothing to it.

CHAPTER XIX

As Betty and I were leaving the Sailing Club one morning, we came face to face with my friend of the Homburg hat. It was a horrid shock to me, and I gasped and clutched Betty's arm. But he was in no way nonplussed, and greeted me with the greatest sang-froid and nonchalance.

He had come down for some sailing, he told us, and was at the hotel. Where were we staying? There was no getting out of it. I had to tell him. He promptly asked if he might do himself the honour of coming to call. It was impossible to refuse. As soon as I could I said good-bye, and dragging Betty on explained to her who this charming

person was. She shouted with laughter.

"Oh, Betty," I said, "do stop laughing, and tell me what I am to do."

"*Do?* Why, bless you, child, make yourself charming to him," said Betty.

"But——" I said blankly.

"How I do wish people weren't so unimaginative," soliloquized Betty, staring up into the green depths of the beeches above us. "It makes me tired. They miss all the amusement of life, and without it, what on earth is the object in living? Gabrielle, my jewel, I'd like to shake you," she remarked, smiling round at me in the most seraphic way imaginable. "Why *but?* It's all right. He can't drag you away by force to Welsh hotels. You are quite safe. *I'm* here. What more can you

possibly want? Get all the fun out of it there is to be got. I wish I could din it into people thoroughly. If it had not been my rule in life always to take all the fun that came my way, so long as my doing so hurt no one else, I'd have died of the deadly dreariness of existence years ago."

"You are certainly a first-rate advertisement for the result of your rule in life," I told her, regarding her bright face with its expression of inextinguishable good humour.

"Appropriate it," said Betty, "you will always 'arrive' all right. I wouldn't recommend it to a stupid woman; but then, a woman who can't take care of herself is a fool and not worth considering. Freedom is everything. Don't be 'cooped up' about things. Here is some fun—don't be afraid of it. You will be all right if you keep your wits about you

and have lots of self-confidence. People with limited horizons are enormously to be pitied. One's horizon becomes limited if one shies at things for little antediluvian scruples or survivals of grandmotherly propriety. Mind you, I don't hold a brief for fast women, they make me sick. But the Unimaginative Woman—called in some places the good woman—is the great drawback to our men and to our country."

"Oh," I said; "well, Betty, I confess that you talk good talk. What I like about you is that you always think things out to your advantage. Most women who have the brains to think things out seem inevitably to arrive at conclusions that are unpalatable and to their disadvantage. I suppose that's where being an imaginative woman comes in, eh?"

"Just as you like," she said with a great cheery laugh. "Anyway my rule in life makes for lightening the gloom of the world, which is the greatest mission that exists, I consider. Glory, who are these?"

They were the major-man and the subaltern. They greeted us rapturously, and with one accord broke into voluble explanations of the reason of their advent. To save time I will simply say that the reasons they gave obviously bore not the faintest shadow of relation to the truth. We asked them to come and call, which they with one voice, and before we had got the invitation out, agreed to do. As soon as we left them I fell upon Betty, who admitted that she had not kept secret the fact that she was coming to Bembury to stay with me. "The more the merrier," she

said. "It will be better fun than the Homburg hat man by himself. By the way, dear child, I don't for a second believe he is here for sailing. He must have found out that you were here."

"Impossible," I said.

"Not at all," declared Betty. "There are many ways and means. A small golden coin will work wonders even with the employees of such immaculate establishments as Messrs. Grigley & Co."

"Well," I said, "you don't at all seem to see the tragedy of the whole thing."

"The *what?*" gasped Betty.

"The *tragedy*," I repeated. "Don't you see, Colonel Walter will think I've asked all these beastly people to come here."

"Tell him you have had nothing to do with it," said Betty.

"And suppose he doesn't believe me?" I asked her.

"He will, Jewel. He knows you, and you have truthful eyes, luckily for you."

All the same I felt dubious on the subject, and worried about the whole thing.

"Well, thank goodness, no one else can come," I said, as we reached the house, "that is one comfort. We have had enough shocks for one day."

But we had not apparently. On the hall table was a telegram. It said that Aunt Arabella would arrive that evening.

"Aunt Arabella!" I gasped; "she doesn't even ask if I want her, but descends upon me at hardly a moment's notice. Aunt Arabella—and all these men here."

Betty collapsed into the nearest

chair and laughed till I could have beaten her. At last she got to her feet, and still laughing came over and took me by the shoulders.

"Jewel," she said, "you shall give a tea-party for her. They shall all come to meet Aunt Arabella. Colonel Walter, Mr. Greatorex, the Homburg hat, the major-man, and the subaltern."

It was a magnificent idea. I clutched on to Betty, and we both laughed till we cried.

CHAPTER XX

COLONEL WALTER was a perfect angel.

I told him everything when he appeared that afternoon. He not only took my word as a matter of course as to my being innocent of connivance at the appearance of the three cavaliers, but moreover quite tumbled to the joke of the whole thing, and promised to assist at Aunt Arabella's tea-party and make as much racket as possible. If we had a really rowdy party, I hoped she might depart as precipitately as she came. How could Betty and I possibly enjoy life with Aunt Arabella tacked on to us?

I sent notes to the four members of the prospective tea-party, saying

that I should be delighted to see them at tea-time on the next afternoon, and four notes came back to say that their senders would be more than delighted to accept my invitation. Thereafter Betty, Colonel Walter and I devoted ourselves to getting what food, drink and smokes we could locally, and wiring for the rest from town. Aunt Arabella turned up in the evening all smiles and graciousness. Unfortunately she became rather ruffled before she had been in the house an hour. It happened in this wise—

Violet and Lionel, in immaculate attire, were sent down by Nurse to say "how do you do" to the stern lady. Now I had lately been reading *Uncle Remus* to them, and the choice expressions and expletives in that alluring book the children treasured carefully in the inner recesses of their

minds, and brought them gleefully out on every possible and impossible occasion, the result always being appreciative laughter and applause from any "grown-up" present. So now, as Betty and I sat making ourselves pleasant to Aunt Arabella with signal success, the door opened, two cherubic little figures danced up to the stiff lady, halted before her, and two high little voices piped out—

"'Ullo, Stinkin' Jim!"

The two radiant small faces slowly clouded over as the expected laughter failed to greet this delightful salutation. Betty and I were petrified. My aunt with an expression of unspeakable outrage, fell upon the shrinking babies and absolutely annihilated them with stinging words. I hastily took them, sobbing and clinging to me, out of the room, and having comforted them, explained that although

Betty and I and Colonel Walter didn't mind being called "Stinkin' Jim," some people thought that it was very rude. They soon cheered up, poor mites, and I next told them that they must come and beg Aunt Arabella's pardon, promising first to go and explain to her that so far from meaning to be rude, they had only wished to make her laugh.

Leaving them in the school-room, I went on my mission, and found Betty doing her utmost to pacify my relative, explaining whence came the quotation, and how that the entire household had for days submitted to being called by this and other delightful expressions. It was not easy to mollify my aunt. She told me that she might have known I was incapable of bringing up children properly, and a good deal more to the same effect. She also said that she blamed me and not

the children for this episode. I begged her to tell the children so, saying that they were at present scared to death by her reception of them. I opened the door and called them, and they came in shyly. Each carried a paper in one hand, and advancing to Aunt Arabella, "Please, we're sorry," they said in frightened little voices, and laid the papers down upon Aunt Arabella's lap. For a moment I squirmed in terror lest these small peace-offerings might be a fresh cause of offence, for Colonel Walter drew sheets of fearsome caricatures for the children, and these might be selections from the same. But with relief I next saw they were all that could be desired for the occasion, being in fact the results of last Sunday's labours. Upon Violet's paper a sick-looking rabbit sat hunched up on its hind legs, with

"Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," appearing in scrawly characters above its solitary ear. Lionel's bore the words, "He that entereth not by the door, the same is a thief and a robber," squeezed into a corner above a very large and very deformed cat.

Aunt Arabella beamed approvingly over these evidences of a Sabbath rightly spent. I may here remark that the animal in each case represented the day's labour, the text having been added as an afterthought, and under pressure from Nurse, whose ideas were strict on such subjects.

This, however, is a detail. Peace was restored, and I blessed those weird drawings.

CHAPTER XXI

Poor Aunt Arabella was destined for more shocks. She seemed to attract them in some curious way. Though as a matter of fact, the reason was easily found in the circumstance that so many things shocked her.

Everything was going splendidly on the day of the tea-party. My aunt was charmed to hear that we had arranged one specially for her, and made herself agreeable in consequence.

Betty and I spent the morning in filling the drawing-room with flowers, and at about three o'clock we went to our several rooms to make ourselves lovely. The children were being dressed up-stairs amid shrill

protest on their own part, and fearsome scolding on Nurse's. Sounds of the strife came down to me as I changed into a soft muslin frock smothered in filmy lace and ending at the skirt in billowy frills.

As I tucked a big cream rose into my belt for a finishing touch, I noted that I had fifteen minutes in hand, and was meditating a descent to the drawing-room to pat cushions and see that all things were as they should be, when the parlour-maid tapping at my door, told me that the gentleman whose card she gave me had asked to see me alone for a minute. It was the Homburg hat man. After a moment's cogitation I told her to show him into the library and tell him I would be down soon. Then to Betty's room I ran to ask her advice on the subject.

"Go and see him," said Betty,

"only leave the door open when you go in, and make him understand you have only a second to spare. It's as well to get it over. You were bound to have a scene."

There came another tap at the door. The parlour-maid wished to tell me that Mr. Greatorex was down-stairs and would like to see me alone for a few minutes. I gave directions that he should be shown into the school-room—and the maid went away.

"Betty—you beast!" I said, for she was choking with laughter.

"Arrah, Jewel, let them all come," cried Betty. "Now, look here, child, keep your head screwed on tight and squash them both, *quite* kindly, mind you, but *very* firmly. They will recover in time. I'm going down-stairs now and shall be in the drawing-room if you should

want me. But I'm sure you will manage all right."

I was following Betty out of the door, when, as ill-luck would have it, the tail of my frock twisted round a water-jug and upset it. In an instant my feet were saturated, and I had to go back to my room to change my shoes and stockings. As I pulled on the necessary apparel, ring after ring at the door-bell warned me that the "tea-party" had arrived, and I still had two interviews to get through before I could join my guests in the drawing-room. As I fastened the last suspender clasp, my bedroom door suddenly opened, and in shot Aunt Arabella.

"Oh, Aunt Arabella, what *is* the matter?" I gasped, gazing with apprehension upon her rigid and forbidding countenance.

"Gabrielle," said my aunt in an

awful voice, "what am I to say to you?"

I told her that I really didn't know, but that it was open to her to terminate my ignorance on the subject.

"I go into the school-room," said Aunt Arabella sternly, "and I discover there a young man all alone!"

"Yes?" I said sweetly.

"He told me that he was waiting there for a promised interview with you—for I asked him what he was doing there," pursued my aunt.

"Well?" I asked.

"I went into the library," she continued, waxing still more irate, "and there was *another* man. He too was waiting for an interview in private, for I asked him."

"Well?" I said again, "they were both quite correct, Aunt Arabella."

"Well!" repeated my aunt,

"Gabrielle, I ask you how can you account reasonably to me for such a state of affairs—you, a young unprotected woman—arranging *two* private interviews with men and a crowd of others waiting for you in the drawing-room, for I looked in there before coming up here, and their faces portrayed *great disappointment* at seeing me. Now, once more, how do you account for the presence of *five* men in your house?"

"They were all asked to tea to meet you, Aunt Arabella," I blandly said.

"And what about those two *private* interviews?" she demanded.

"Ah! I had forgotten," I said, making for the door, "you must excuse me. I have kept them waiting for an unconscionable time. We shall meet in the drawing-room presently, Aunt Arabella," and I ran down-stairs.

"Think of your poor husband," shouted my aunt over the banisters.

There was a telegraph boy at the open hall door. I took the brown envelope he held out and tore it open.

"Oh!" I cried, "Oh! oh!"

The Homburg hat man appeared at the library door. From the schoolroom came Mr. Greatorex. Betty rushed out of the drawing-room followed by Colonel Walter, the major-man and the subaltern. Aunt Arabella, the personification of stern disapproval, stood upon the stairs.

"What has happened?" she inquired in a sepulchral voice.

"*Peter is coming home*," I said, indeed I shouted it in my joy. So happy I was, so triumphantly, radiantly glad.

"And not one moment too soon," said my aunt sententiously, where-

upon she turned her back and went up-stairs again.

But I hadn't time to think of her.

"How beautiful, Betty," I said; "he will be at Dover to-morrow morning. I must go and get ready at once to go up to town to-night, so that I can be at Dover to meet him in the morning. Please everybody excuse me, won't you? You see, I can't possibly help it," and I smiled at them and waved my hands as I went up-stairs. "Betty will run the tea-party beautifully," I called down, "you will find her simply ripping."

I put on a travelling frock, and packed my dressing-case, and twenty minutes later Betty came into my room.

"I've had a strenuous time," she said, sitting down very limply for Betty. "They were all like a grandpapa with gout in his toe. Mr.

Greatorex was rude to the Homburg hat man—you see, he saw him come out of the library—and the major-man called the subaltern a puppy—indirectly, of course—and they would not eat any tea, and they have all gone away in a perfectly devilish temper."

I shrieked with laughter.

"And Colonel Walter is waiting to say good-bye to you in the drawing-room," Betty said, when I stopped. She looked very grave, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

"You didn't see his face when you told us so gaily," she said. "Ah, the pitifulness of it! Child, go—and be very gentle with him."

CHAPTER XXII

I CAN'T write down what we said to each other. I told Peter afterwards that I'd tell him if he wished, but he said such things were sacred between the persons concerned, and no one else had any right to know what passed. Colonel Walter took me up to town that evening at my request. He insisted on taking me to a theatre after dinner, because he said if I wasn't distracted I should be quite ill with the excitement of looking forward to the next day. He was so gay—and so cheery, and so kind to me, and thoughtful for my comfort in every way. Yet I knew that he was suffering all the time. He drove with me to the hotel after the theatre, on his way

to his club. We were quite silent as the hansom bowled along—the horse's bell tinkling cheerily.

I slipped my hand into his and he held it tightly, and so we sat. We were getting very near the hotel when he turned towards me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"May I kiss you good-night, my child?" he asked, and his voice was husky and very low.

"Please," I said.

He took my face tenderly in his two hands and kissed me on the forehead, on the eyes, and on the lips.

"My love," he whispered, "my love," and gave one great horrible sob.

The cab stopped. We had reached the hotel. Colonel Walter got out and handed me down. He was very white and very calm, but

I saw his mouth under his dear grey moustache twitching and quivering.

"I shall never care for any one as I do for you," I said very low, standing close to him, and then, I just couldn't help it, and I didn't care one bit for the hotel porter or the cabby who was looking on. I put my arms round Colonel Walter's neck and hugged him as hard as I could.

"You have been more good to me than any one in all the world," I whispered, "and I shall love you for it always," and I kissed him on his dear mouth.

He got into the cab and drove away without looking back. As it went out of sight I saw him put his hand over his eyes.

CHAPTER XXIII

PETER and I went down to Cornwall. It was beautiful there, and we had a perfectly glorious time.

One day he asked to see the diary I had promised to keep for him. I went to fetch it and gave it to him, but before he began to read it, I said—

"Peter, if you had kept a diary would you have liked me to read it?"

He hesitated. I waited.

"Would there have been bits in it," I said at last, "little bits that you would rather I didn't read?"

He flushed a bit, but he looked me very straight in the eyes as he said—

"Yes—there would have been."

"Peter," I said, "there are bits in mine that I feel shy about you reading."

He folded the papers, and handed them back to me without a word.

"But I should be unhappy if you didn't read it all," I said, giving them back to him.

Then he kissed me, and sat down, and read my diary through from beginning to end. When he had finished he kissed me again, put his arm round me and drew me down on his knee.

"I want to talk to you," he said. "My darling knows that I care for her beyond everything in the world, and I know that she cares for me in the same way. A man and his wife owe each other a certain duty—and, in one respect, a complete fidelity. You understand, don't you, darling? But, as one goes through

life one meets people with whom, for some occult reason that one cannot explain or understand, one has an affinity, and one owes them something of consideration, and of affection, and of true friendship. One's love for the partner of one's existence is in no way affected by this, and loses nothing from it. Betty is quite right. When these strange affinities cross one's path, one owes them something, and must pay it, only remembering the fidelity and allegiance one owes to one's wife—or husband—first of all."

He looked me in the eyes again.

"I have never for half a moment forgotten the complete fidelity I owe my little wife," he said, "and, no matter what affinities I may meet, I never will."

"Nor will I," I whispered.

Then we hugged each other.

Peter and I asked Colonel Walter to come and stay with us before we went back to India. He came, and Peter loved him as much as I do. We asked Aunt Arabella to tea one day while he was there, and she saw what pals we three were, and how fond Peter was of Colonel Walter. She went away looking completely puzzled and at sea, and as if all her landmarks had been altered and the foundations of her opinions torn up. Poor Aunt Arabella!

Now that we are back in India, I write to my dear Doctor every week and he writes to me, and I love him next best to Peter and always shall. I am certain that no man ever has loved a woman so unselfishly and so honourably and so *really* as he has loved me. And, although I feel that I could never be really happy without him for my friend, yet

thinking of him often hurts me, because although I have brought him some happiness, I have brought him suffering also—the two most strangely mingled. I wonder and wonder why this should be. But the inscrutable Ruler of Destinies is always silent. I can only tell myself, "It is Kismet."

THE END

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